International Journal of China Studies
Vol. 12, No. 1, June 2021, pp. 25-46

The Little Pinks: Self-mobilized Nationalism and State Allies in Chinese Cyberspace

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Abstract

Previous studies on cyber politics in China have highlighted the antagonistic relationship between the state and society, either emphasizing on how the state controls online opinions or how the Internet politically empowers individuals. Recent studies went further to reveal the possibility of collaboration between the state and certain online groups. Following the new line of research, this paper presents a case study of the "Little Pinks" and argues that the heterogeneous cyberspace could spontaneously generate netizen groups that may well align and cooperate with the authoritarian regime. The Little Pinks is a group of influential young Chinese netizens who are nationalistic-oriented and readily defend their government online. Although Chinese authorities have attempted to guide and mobilize them, they are at most allies, but never a subsidiary of the government. They have demonstrated astonishing organizational capability in collective actions, which is derived from the vibrant fandom culture in the Chinese cyberspace.

Keywords: *cyber-politics, fandom groups, youth politics, nationalism, authoritarianism, China*

1. Introduction

At 7pm on 20 January 2016, a few days after Tsai Ing-wen was elected as Taiwan's president, tens of thousands of Chinese netizens skirted the Great Firewall[1] to "bombard" Tsai's Facebook pages and pro-independence news media with excessive pro-China memes and messages. In less than 24 hours, over 70,000 comments were posted on Tsai's page (Henochowicz, 2016 in *China Digital Times*, 4 August). The Chinese netizens who coordinated and executed the event is widely known as the "Little Pinks (*xiao fenhong*)", a group of youths who are nationalistic and ready to defend the Chinese government on the Internet.

The Little Pinks' collective actions are often targeted at events arousing widespread nationalism among the Chinese. As a result, they are often seen in recent years at events where patriotic sentiments are at an all time high (*The Economist*, 2016). Right after the arbitration against China's interest in the South China Sea disputes in 2016, the Little Pinks surged online to excoriate anti-Chinese individuals and entities, which boasted 13.1 million posts and some with thousands of comments as at the end of 2018 (Weibo, 2018). There were also attempts to take things offline. When South Korea decided to deploy the American anti-ballistic missile defence system in 2017, the Little Pinks again called out on various social media platforms to boycott South Korean supermarket chain store Lotte.[2]

Previous studies on cyberspace in authoritarian regimes have highlighted the antagonistic relationship between the state and society (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008; Mäkinen, 2006; Rød and Weidmann, 2015). Studies that focused on China also largely fall under this tradition. On one hand, studies on Internet censorship (Benney and Xu, 2017; King et al., 2014), and public opinion-guiding mechanisms (Han, 2015; King et al., 2017) attempted to explain how the state could exploit Internet technology to assert control and suppress the cyberspace. On the other hand, there are studies that highlighted the Internet technology's empowerment of individuals through the creation of virtual public sphere, allowing and encouraging different forms of expressions and criticisms against the state (Yang, 2009). Besides these two perspectives, however, there is also the possibility of cooperation between state and society.

Some recent studies have indeed suggested that the heterogeneous cyberspace could produce online groups that spontaneously cooperate with the government (Han, 2018). In this sense, even though authoritarian governments would always attempt to impose controls over cyberspace, the Internet can still develop a series of variegated and fragmented circles, groups, subcultures and cyber societies. China's Internet economy is largely a market economy dominated by private companies. This provides mediums for self-flourishing of various online popular cultures, fan cultures and youth subcultures, which make up the diversified and fragmented Chinese cyberspace.

Such diverse groups provide room and vitality for the generation and exchanges of different ideas. Indeed, there have been heated debates among a variety of ideas and ideologies on the Chinese Internet (Shi-Kupfer et al., 2017). Among these ideas, there are unorthodox ones, as well as those partially aligned with official discourse. It is also very possible that there are self-emerged opinions and perspectives in the cyberspace which are well-aligned with the regime, and will voluntarily turned themselves into allies of regimes (Han, 2018). In this aspect, Internet can spontaneously cooperate with the authoritarian state. The Little Pinks phenomena is one such prominent example.

While nationalism in contemporary China is well-studied, it is mostly seen as constructed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to bolster the legitimacy of its regime (Guo et al., 2007; He, 2018; Hyun et al., 2014; Zhao, 1998). However, since the 1990s, the rise of popular nationalism in China had been observed in cases of anti-Japanese and anti-American protests (Gries, 2005). Such bottom-up nationalism sentiments should be differentiated from state-led or state-constructed nationalism. As pointed out by Mearsheimer, "What makes nationalism in contemporary China such a potent force is that it is both a top-down and a bottom-up phenomenon" (Mearsheimer, 2014: 401). While the top-down approach is widely discussed in previous studies, the possibility of self-developed nationalism among the grassroots have not been thoroughly examined despite its importance in understanding the state-society relationship and civil society development in China.

Based on a case study of the Little Pinks, this paper argues that the heterogenous cyberspace in China has facilitated the spontaneous emergence of popular nationalism on Chinese Internet. Even though state-sponsored nationalism could possibly have created a macro-environment that is conducive for the rise of Little Pinks, Little Pinks were seldom directly organized by the state. They are products of the diversified Internet culture in China.

The Little Pinks possess self-mobilization and organizational skills that are deeply rooted in the Chinese commercial and fandom culture, in which intense online debates are very common between different fan groups. Their skills are evident in their abilities to formulate collective identity, establish organization and operation plans, and ride the tides of online discourse.

This paper also wants to argue that although the state has played a proactive role in co-opting and guiding the Little Pinks, the Little Pinks did not become a subordinate of the state. They are at most allies of the state. They are also only one strand of political attitudes among China's youth, where there is a decreasing trend of nationalism generally.

Nevertheless, studying this unique strand of nationalistic youth is important for the understanding of regime stability in an authoritarian setting. Several established studies have provided invaluable insights on the sources of regime support in China from the perspective of political culture or attitudes (Chu, 2013; Chu, 2016; Tang, 2016). This study hopes to contribute to the discussion by revealing how citizens could take voluntary political actions to defend an authoritarian regime. Our findings also aim to further the understanding on the foundations of bottom-up nationalism, whereby popular culture groups could provide resources for the organization and mobilization of nationalistic movements.

The empirical findings of this paper are derived from close reading of online posts, news reports and existing literature. The authors studied posts and discussion threads on Facebook, Baidu forums, Weibo and other relevant

social media sites to understand the Little Pinks' behaviours. Some of those can be clearly identified as posted by members of Little Pinks,[3] and others are discussions about them. The following sections will first briefly trace how the Little Pinks emerged and developed into one of the prominent nationalist groups online. Following that, a detailed study on the 2016 bombardment of Facebook pages will reveal the mobilizational and organizational abilities of Little Pinks, and explain how such abilities are derived from the fandom culture. Then, the paper shows how the party attempted to enlist and co-opt the Little Pinks. The final section will position Little Pinks in the general trend of nationalism among Chinese youth and demonstrate that the Little Pinks are not significantly contributing to a more nationalistic China.

2. The Birth of Little Pinks: From Literature Lovers to Patriotic Youth

The Little Pinks start-up was not due to any governmental initiatives, but as a natural product of the Internet. They originated from Jinjiang Literary City, an online portal for sharing original writings on romantic love. As the background of the website was pink, users of the site, most of whom are females in their 20s, were nicknamed "Little Pinks".[4]

These literature lovers also often visit a hidden forum on this Jinjiang site for political discussions. Their dominant political orientation is pro-Chinese government and they tend to argue against anyone who holds a negative view of the regime.[5] Gradually, the Little Pinks migrated from the hidden forum to different websites to speak out for the government. Other patriotic netizens, of both genders from within and without China, had also emerged to join them. They appeared in discussion forums like Tianya, KDNet, social media platforms like Weibo, subculture websites like AcFun and Bilibili, and fandom forums like Emperor Forum (*Diba*) on Baidu.com.[6]

The term "Little Pinks" was initially used by their rivals as a disparaging and demeaning label in their debates back in 2015. They used the term to deride the Little Pinks as "ideologically regressive, ignorant, and emotionally zealous" (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). Ironically, the Little Pinks accepted the term with pride and turned it into a trademark of their collective identity. As the group evolved, the term is now generally referring to young Chinese netizens who have a pro-government political stance and are ready to defend the government on various issues in cyberspace.

Three factors could have provided a conducive social environment for the emergence and rise of the Little Pinks. First, these young people, mostly born in the 1990s and 1980s, grew up in the period of China's rapid economic growth. Unlike their seniors who had experienced economic hardship and political turmoil and tend to position China in the world from a more modest

perspective, the Little Pinks are culturally and politically more confident (Wang and Zhu, 2016).

They are born in an era of boom, an era with China becoming the second largest economy in the world and "Made in China" products sweeping every corner of the earth. They hold a highly positive view of the "China Model" and development path, taking pride in the regime's achievements and deprecating Western political values (Shi, 2016). The country's economic growth has endowed them with a sense of pride and made them more inclined to become nationalistic, especially those who tasted the fruits of prosperity.

The second factor lies in the patriotic education campaign that started in the 1990s. The campaign is a full-scale and long-term project specifically aimed at instilling patriotism in the entire young generation, and in turn developing such sentiment into a new source of legitimacy for the Party. The curriculum was revised to give emphasis on the victimized role of China in its modern and contemporary history, and the role of CCP as the bearer of China's historic struggle for independence (Wang, 2008). The propaganda machine also selected lists of patriotic songs, films, books, historical sites and events to instil nationalism beyond the classroom and in the whole country (Zhao, 1998).

Studies on young generations have shown that this campaign is at least partially successful in shaping their political attitudes. By highlighting foreign powers' invasion and oppression of China, the patriotic education campaign has nurtured stronger loyalty towards the party-state, and greater support for tougher foreign policies against "foreign pressures" (Qian et al., 2017; Wang, 2008; Zhao, 1998).[7] More recently, a survey experiment based on a textbook reform in China between 2004 and 2010 found that the new curriculum has successfully inculcated in the students greater support for the regime, and higher scepticism of the West (Cantoni et al., 2017). Students with higher attendance in the political education courses had also indicated higher political trust towards the government and the party, and higher pride in the Chinese political system (Lu, 2016).

Third, the rise of Little Pinks is inseparable from the style of mainstream discourse on Chinese cyberspace, which encourages the expression of nationalistic sentiments. With state censorship and public opinion manipulation online, official nationalistic ideology has been the mainstream in the Chinese cyberspace, which to a large extent crowds out other opinions and limits the range of alternative discourses being discussed (Shi-Kupfer and Ohlberg, 2018).

This left Chinese netizens a lack of alternative frameworks and perspectives to understand different issues and the world (Han, 2019). Thus, political expressions and discussions of Chinese Internet users are very likely to replicate and reinforce the nationalistic discourse preferred by the regime,

framing their narratives with concepts of national identity and patriotism (Hyun and Kim, 2015). As a result, apart from the official propaganda, the nationalist discourse put forth spontaneously by netizens appeared to be influential on Chinese social media sites (Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Guo, 2018). The Little Pinks, as the main propagator of such a discourse, have become one of the prominent groups in the Chinese cyberspace.

3. "Facebook Expedition": How Little Pinks Take Actions

Generally, the Little Pinks is a group with fluid membership and no structured organization, hence the difficulty of being clearly defined. They are largely active on various fandom and subcultural sites frequented by youths and mostly engage in apolitical discussions related to their idols, shopping and dramas. In real life, most of them are strangers to each other, with rare physical interactions as they are located all around China and even across the world.

Due to their unstructured and capricious nature, the Little Pinks could not and is not controlled by any official entity or specific organization. This distinguished the Little Pinks from the "fifty-cent party", which is said to be employed by the government to defend the regime on the Internet.[8]

Only when ignited by occasional political event would they transform into a powerful and overwhelming group that acts to shape cyber discourse. In such circumstances when they take political actions online, they would display astonishing organizational skills and unanimous collective identity. A good example is the 2016 "Facebook Expedition", an event named by the Little Pinks for their bombardment of Tsai's Facebook page.

In this event, the fandom groups in the Emperor Forum played a crucial role. The organizers of this event, many of whom are active users of this forum, are ordinary netizens who were self-motivated to take up the responsibility. While it is difficult to identify the organizers of the Facebook Expedition due to the anonymity of Internet users and closed circles, the group of organizers have apparently inherited the organizing tactics of the Emperor Forum.

In the Emperor Forum, there are managers put in charge of each subforum, and all the managers would gather in a closed discussion group to share information and discuss about rules and regulations. After making a collective decision, the managers would then convey these formulated rules and regulations to their respective subforums and superintend accordingly. Users who break the rules will be blacklisted by the managers and required to issue a public apology for their "misconduct" before they can post any comment.

Similarly, for the Facebook Expedition, the organizers had clandestinely and collectively drawn up the plan, outlined rules and guidelines for actions, and prepared step-by-step instructions on how to use Virtual Private Networks

(VPNs) to circumvent the Chinese Great Firewall and access Facebook. The information was then disseminated by the organizers of social media platforms to their recruited participants (Zhang and Wang, 2016). With these plan, rules and instructions, the organizers were able to ensure that participants who joined were fully aware that the purpose of the Expedition was to carry out Facebook bombardment of the pro-independence camp in Taiwan. This thus created strong consensus among the recruited participants.

Efforts were synchronized and participants were made absolutely clear that the Expedition was scheduled to begin on 7pm of 20 January 2016. Even more specifically, instructions were given that 7pm to 7.30pm was allocated for the bombardment of Facebook pages of pro-independence Taiwanese media before moving on to Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page (Qiu, 2016).[9]

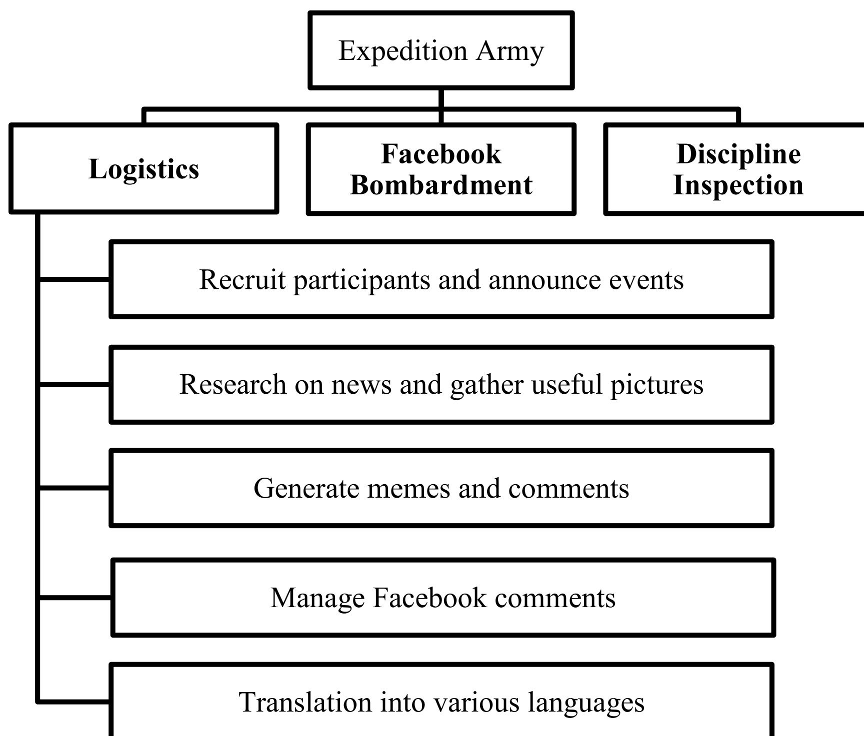
To show solidarity and common identity, the organizers had designed a graphic and encouraged all Facebook Expedition participants to use it for their profile pictures. The graphic has a map of mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, as well as texts "Taiwan belongs to my country", "Taiwan is an inalienable part of China" and "We are Chinese" in both Chinese and English language. They also propagated a belligerent slogan, "Emperor Forum's expedition spares no lives (*Diba chuzheng, cuncai busheng*)".

The organizers laid out rules for participants and disseminated them via different platforms. Besides facilitating coordination, these rules were aimed at creating a "rational" and "civilized" image of Chinese netizens in their charm offensive against pro-independence Taiwanese. Rules laid out included: (i) no vulgarities and fake information, (ii) no insults or erotic photos, and photos of political leaders, (iii) oppose those who advocate Taiwan independence, but befriend all other Taiwanese, and (iv) act only according to the command (XiaojuhuayoueryuanPro, 2016). Those who broke the rules would be kicked out.

Recruited participants were divided into three major clusters (Figure 1), namely, the "Facebook Bombardment" group, "Logistics" team and the "Discipline Inspection" division, each assigned with specific tasks (Sina News, 2016). The "Facebook Bombardment" group was made up of participants who had access to overseas websites and who carried out the bombardment of memes and comments on Facebook. Many of them were Chinese students studying overseas with Facebook accounts (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). Others who did not have Facebook account could share the accounts provided by the organizers or other participants (Yang et al., 2017).

Besides executing the bombardment, they made efforts to publicize what they were doing and their political appeal to the entire cyberspace. The Expedition army provided live broadcast of their Facebook bombardment on video streaming websites such as Bilibili and DouYu, allowing other Internet

Figure 1 Organisational Structure of "Facebook Expedition Army"



Source: Compiled by authors based on information from online observations, and studies such as Guo, X., & Yang, S., 'Wangluo minzu zhuyi yundong zhong de oumushi chuanbo yu gongyi dongyuan' ['The Memetic Communication and Consensus Mobilization in the Cyber Nationalistic Movement']; *Guoji Xinwenjie* [*Chinese Journal of Journalism and Communication*] (November 2016); Long, Y., & Zhang, S., 'Diba tuandui shoudu huiying chuzheng fb' ['Emperor Forum Team Responses for the First Time Regarding Facebook Expedition'], (23 January 2016), available at http://www.guancha.cn/Celebrity/2016_01_23_349006_s.shtml (accessed 4 June 2018).

users, especially Chinese netizens without access to Facebook, to see what was happening. According to screenshots and recounts of audiences, there were tens of thousands of Internet users viewing the live broadcast during the event.[10]

The "Logistics" team was further divided into five major groups.[11] The first group helped to recruit more participants and pose announcements regarding their Expedition via various Chinese social media platforms. The second group researched on Taiwan's pro-independence news reports in order

to tailor rebuttals and arguments, and collect useful pictures for the third group, which was tasked to generate memes using Photoshop. The comments and memes generated were then passed to the "Facebook Bombardment" group for copying and pasting onto Facebook as comments. These groups constituted a production line to facilitate the massive influx of nationalistic comments on Facebook within a short period of time.

The fourth logistics group helped to manage Facebook comments by pressing "like" for favourable comments. Receiving more likes will allow a comment to be listed on top and become easily seen. On top of that, they would report to the Facebook system comments advocating Taiwan independence as "abusive contents", so Facebook would remove them. Sometimes, the Little Pinks' comments and Facebook accounts would also be deleted when they were reported by rival users. In this case, they would either recreate new accounts or borrow from other users "zombie" accounts that were created solely for this Expedition. This mutual removing of accounts was advantageous to the Expedition team, as many of them were not frequent users of Facebook. In contrast, their rivals, mostly Taiwanese in this case, tend to be regular users and had to bear a higher cost if their personal accounts containing social media profiles and contacts were deleted or frozen.

The fifth group was made up of participants with various linguistic abilities. They translated the generated comments into English, Cantonese, Japanese, Russian, German, French, Thai and so on to expand their influence and made their stance known to netizens from other countries and regions.

The "Discipline Inspection" division was put in charge of monitoring behaviours of participants. They would observe their participants' postings on Facebook, on their forum and in their chat groups. Once they discovered a participant breaking their rules, for example posting vulgarities, or turned against them by criticizing China, they would blacklist and expel the misbehaving participant from their contact groups (Gengzhige et al., 2016).

These groups of participants organized themselves by creating chat groups on Tencent QQ Chat. Two types of chat groups were being created: the first was according to different tasks assigned (as explained above) and the second was to serve as headquarters for coordination and issuing of instructions. Recruited participants had to be approved by chat group administrators who were the organizers before they could join the chat groups (Xinmeitianyu, 2016).

The "Facebook Bombardment" participants had also created groups to coordinate actions on Facebook, which still exist to date. Some of these groups have been kept active, and promptly called for bombardment of hostile foreign entities whenever triggered by new events. For instance, the news of three Chinese tourists being forcibly removed by police from a hotel in Sweden had led to the bombardment of the Facebook pages of

Sweden's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, national television broadcaster Sveriges Television, and its host Jesper Rönndahl.

4. Sources of Organizational Capability: Commercial and Fandom Culture

There are interviews showing the many Little Pinks grew out of the fandom culture (Wang et al., 2016; Wu, 2016). Their organizational and Internet debate skills during the Facebook Expedition resemble those of fan group debates. China's market reform in the recent decades gave rise to the rapid growth of its Internet economy, which in turn breeds a vibrant fandom culture in the Chinese online sphere. Being active members of various social media sites, especially fandom-related, is one reason why the Little Pinks could successfully recruit and mobilize participants for the Facebook Expedition, and why similar techniques of fandom debates were seen to be in use.

In fandom culture, people who share similar interest and pleasure towards a pop-/sub-cultural genre, a particular production or an individual would gather in communities. They are socially connected and engaged via their similar interest (Fiske, 1992; Zhang, 2016). Specifically, a group of fans would share their views, and encourage patronage and support for their idols. Through frequent interactions among themselves, they develop well-established organizational skills and rules. For instance, Chinese fans of Stefanie Sun, the leading Singapore singer, have set up and interact in fan pages on Weibo and Baidu forums to share the latest news, activities or products related to Sun. Sun's Weibo has attracted around three million followers to date.

Between different groups of fans, rivalry and arguments would put their organizational structure and discourse-setting skills to test. Studies found that some Little Pinks possessed immense media experience and skills gained from defending their idols and downplaying their idols' competitors in online debates (Wang et al., 2016).

The Little Pinks inherited from fandom culture four specific characteristics. First, they have learnt to forge common identities. Fans of a certain pop culture idol would adopt a common label as a form of self-identity (Chen and Lin, 2016). For instance, fans of Stefanie Sun would call themselves "zimi", which in Chinese means fans of Sun Yanzi (Chinese name of Stefanie Sun). Fandom groups would give demeaning labels to their rivals too. For instance, the Little Pinks were labelled by their opponents, and they retaliated with labels like "traitors", "US fans" and "Paving the Way Party", accusing their rivals of leading "foreign invaders" into the country (Shi-Kupfer et al., 2017). Such demeaning labels have also enhanced identities of the target groups.

Second, the Little Pinks have learnt tactics of collective actions from fandom culture. Debates between different groups over “whose idol is better” are very common, which often lead to bombardment of their rivals’ Internet forums. Such actions in turn would reinforce their common identity (Wang et al., 2016). For instance, different fandom groups had indulged in heated disputes over which idol sings better in the 2009 television singing competition for female contestants. This had ultimately resulted in a bombardment of scornful comments on one of the contestant’s forum on Baidu (Sina News, 2015). The Little Pinks, who inherited such a culture, also employed such tactics on the Facebook pages of Tsai and the pro-independence Taiwan media.

Third, the high intensity of such debates has forced individual fans to organize themselves so as to overwhelm their opponents and win the Internet battles (Chen and Lin, 2016). Fandom groups usually have a group of core members in charge of drawing up rules and organizing events. They would also produce guidelines to help new members analyze negative news related to their idols, and ways to refute criticisms with “rationality, evidence and constraint” (Wang et al., 2016). Such organizing methods were subsequently observed during the Facebook Expedition.

Finally, the Little Pinks have learnt from fandom groups ways to make use of the rise and fall of public sentiments online and the periodicity of online debates. In cases where their idols have been derogatorily smeared or splashed with negative news, the fandom groups would keep a low profile to avoid futile quarrels or unwanted public attention. After the news fizzled out, they would then emerge to defend their idols with arguments to discredit the critics and provide explanations for their idols (Wang et al., 2016).

In cases where they have the upper hand, they would inundate their opponents or targets of criticisms with derisive phrases and memes to paralyse the latter’s communication platform and silent their voices. Just like the Facebook Expedition, the Little Pinks had taken advantage of the surging sentiments triggered by an event of a Taiwanese artist waving the Taiwan flag on a television show, as well as the presidential election in Taiwan. The anger of Chinese netizens was therefore garnered and mobilized for the Internet bombardment.

5. Relationship with the Party-State

The potential of Little Pinks was quickly recognized by the Chinese authorities. The Communist Youth League (CYL), the CCP’s mobilization vehicle among the youth, has taken the lead to guide the Little Pinks (Sansan, 2016). While several of the CCP’s mouthpieces, such as the *People’s Daily* and *Global Times*, have also been working on the manipulation of online public opinions, it was mainly the CYL that played a major role.

The CYL, a former career accelerator for Chinese political leaders, has been compelled to redefine its role in the party-state system since President Xi Jinping came to power. Being a base for a competing faction led by his predecessor Hu Jintao, the CYL has not been blessed by Xi. Its organization has been streamlined and scope of activities restricted, while financial resources have been cut (Shan & Chen, 2020). As the CYL struggled to adapt, one of its efforts was to transform itself into an opinion leader for youth in cyberspace. It seeks to guide and mobilize Chinese youth in favour of the regime. To connect with the youth, the central CYL and many provincial/local CYLs have set up accounts on Weibo. The Central CYL account has attracted over 15 million followers, while the provincial/local CYL accounts attracted followers ranging from 100,000 to about two million.[12]

In an attempt to enlist the Little Pinks, the Chinese authorities defined all followers of CYL's Weibo accounts as Little Pinks.[13] In fact, the CYL's Weibo posts have went further to refer all post-1990s and post-1980s youth as Little Pinks, with an intention of expanding its influence to the entire young generation (Weibo, 2016a). Playing as the leader of Chinese youth, the CYL publicly praised Little Pinks' attack on Tsai's Facebook page (Wang, 2016) and encouraged them to do more for the "motherland". While the League was merely acting as a supporter during the Facebook Expedition, it has begun to create an agenda for the Little Pinks to wage Internet fights.

In July 2016, the central CYL's Weibo account accused Chinese movie director Zhao Wei of casting Taiwanese actor Leon Dai, a supporter of Taiwanese Independence, as its male lead. The League's posts ignited Little Pinks' rage. They lashed out at Zhao on the Chinese Internet and condemned her as a traitor (*BBC*, 2016). Ten days later, Zhao gave in and apologized, promising to cut Dai out of the film even though the movie had completed filming (Shen, 2016).

The CYL also tapped on fandom culture and pop idols to appeal to the Little Pinks. After the South China Sea arbitration, the CYL collaborated with a group of young rappers to produce patriotic music, such as one titled "South China Sea, South China Sea" (Vista, 2017). The League also reported that many Chinese pop idols had voiced their support for China's claim over the South China Sea (Hao, 2016), aiming to arouse their fans' nationalistic sentiments.

Within two months after the announcement of the South China Sea ruling (July and August 2016), the number of followers on central CYL's Weibo account more than doubled (Weibo, 2016a). When CYL created a discussion thread titled "South China Sea belongs to China", many Little Pinks joined to ridicule the arbitration using memes and caricatures, and even called for boycotts against the American fast food chain store KFC. As of the end of 2018, this discussion thread boasts 582,000 posts and more than a billion viewership (Weibo, 2016b).

However, the Little Pinks have not become a subsidiary of the CYL or the Chinese government; their relationship is at most that of allies. They resemble unpredictable guerrilla fighters in cyberspace who are difficult to be entirely enlisted. This is due to the unstructured and fluidity characteristics of the Little Pinks, as well as their diversified interests beyond fandom culture. Furthermore, fandom culture is based on consumerism, whereby fans exhibit strong individualistic orientation offline (Chen, 2017). This suggests that the Little Pinks are fragmented individuals, and each of their interest and identity could be shifting from time to time.

The Chinese government could only try to galvanize the Little Pinks using particular events, which are short-termed, to achieve political aims. At the same time, the government would need to use soliciting methods that cater to the Little Pinks' liking. More specifically, it was the CYL which adopted the lingos and discourse of the Little Pinks (Guo, 2018), instead of the Little Pinks courting the attention of the CYL.

The relationship between the Chinese government and the Little Pinks is one with cooperation and mutual exploitation, as the Chinese government also has misgivings about the Little Pinks. For instance, during the Zhao Wei incident, a WeChat subscription account run by the *People's Daily* sternly criticized the Little Pinks' conspiracy theories and insular nationalism (Situgezi, 2016). A governmental report published in 2017 recognized the influence of the Little Pinks, but also cautioned against its impetuousness and extremism (Zhu et al., 2016). During the Facebook Expedition, the authorities had also been monitoring their online activities, deleting some of the Little Pinks' posts and shutting down their live streaming (Han, 2019).

Beijing understands that nationalism is a double-edged sword. On one hand, this nationalistic weapon could induce political support from the citizens. On the other hand, popular demands could also increase pressure on the government (Weiss, 2014). Therefore, the Chinese government have supported such sentiments at certain instances, while suppressing them at other times.

6. Discussion: Little Pinks as One Strand among Chinese Youth

Overall, the Little Pinks is a prominent group of nationalistic youth that has emerged online in the recent years. Most of the Little Pinks were born in the 1990s, a period of China's rapid economic growth, which makes them culturally and politically more confident than the older generations. While the Little Pinks are generally unstructured and capricious netizens, they often demonstrate impressive organizational capability when taking collective actions. Such organizational capability is a product of the vibrant fandom culture in Chinese cyberspace where different fan groups often engage

in heated arguments. Generally, the Little Pinks are allies of the Chinese government who stand ready to swarm out as an Internet army to defend the government against unfavourable and critical comments. However, they are neither a subsidiary nor controlled by the Chinese government.

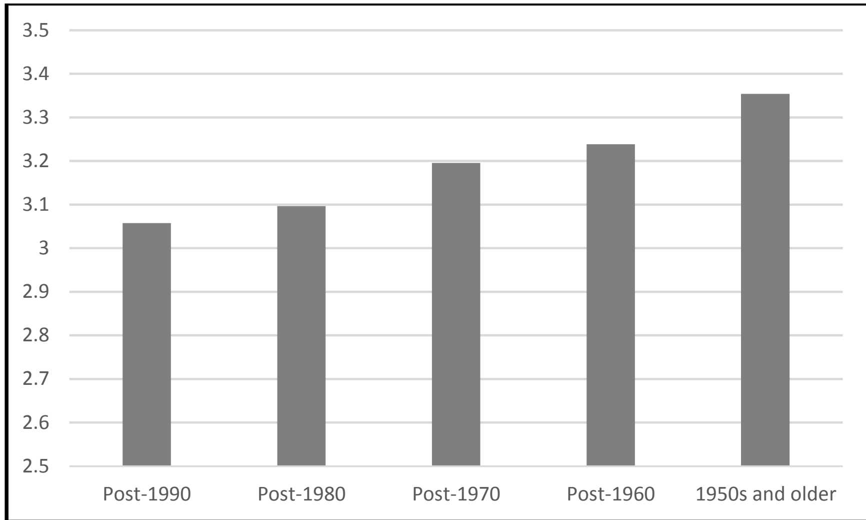
Examination of the Little Pinks and their behaviours has furthered our understanding of authoritarian regime stability. More specifically, it reveals that such stability is not necessarily maintained through coercion; in certain circumstances, citizens could spontaneously stand up for their government. Furthermore, the case of Little Pinks also shed light on the mechanism that produces bottom-up nationalism. Groups in popular culture, under some conditions, could lend support to collective organization and mobilization during events fuelled with nationalistic sentiments.

As a nationalistic group, the Little Pinks are different from their predecessors in China, such as the Boxers and the "Angry Youths".[14] They do not possess that xenophobia and vehement anger. They grow up in the era when China is enmeshed in rapid globalization. In fact, many of the Little Pinks have travelled overseas, with some residing overseas. They have better understanding of the outside world than the older generations, and they tend to express their political opinions in a relatively restraint and entertaining way (Wang et al., 2016).

Even though the Little Pinks could appear defensive of the Chinese government on matters of foreign affairs and sovereignty, they do not necessarily display the same attitude when it comes to domestic politics. They may be critical of the government in some specific local policy issues. For instance, when their patronizing sites and entertainment were cracked down by the government as a form of censorship or removal of content, they would also display discontent and rage on the Internet.[15] On forums such as the Douban Goose Group, a famous site where many female Little Pinks gather, the users have been unsatisfied with certain government measures that suppressed feminist movements.[16] Some scholars would argue that such critical stances could work in favour of the party-state. As long as such comments remain far from threatening the regime's stability, they would be allowed to act as a mechanism for the state to detect dissatisfaction and grievances in the society (Chen & Xu, 2017; Huang et al., 2019).

In the broader sense, the Little Pinks do not reflect the political orientation of the entire young generation in today's China. The general trend among Chinese youth is not veering towards widespread nationalism (Johnston, 2017). Public opinion surveys have revealed that the young generation in China is the least nationalistic cohort when compared to the older generations. As shown in Figure 2, Chinese citizens born in the 1990s and 1980s are significantly less nationalistic than the older generations.[17]

Figure 2 Level of Nationalism by Age Groups in China



Source: Created by authors using data from the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey.

While the Little Pinks attempt to defend the authoritarian regime, the young generation in today's China as a whole is in fact more critical than their seniors. Study had revealed that Chinese citizens are acquiring stronger democratic values, and their priorities are shifting toward the expansion of freedom and empowerment of citizens (Wang and You, 2016).

To date, the Chinese government still enjoys very high level of popular support and the Little Pinks is a manifestation of such a phenomenon among the young netizens. As pointed out by many China scholars, such high-level support is based on traditional Confucian values and Beijing's remarkable economic performance (Chu, 2013; Yang and Tang, 2010). However, economic development itself is expected to induce value change, putting emphasis on individual rights and self-expression, and weaken Confucian values (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Furthermore, rapid economic growth cannot last forever. Indeed, Chinese economic growth rate has dropped from double digit to below 7% in recent years. Such a drop in economic performance could possibly affect the popular support enjoyed by Beijing.

As these two pillars of popular support are being gradually eroded and transformed, Chinese citizens' level of trust towards their government is also declining (Wang and You, 2016). When the number of "critical citizens" (Norris, 1999) among the young generation in China increases, it remains to be seen if the Little Pinks will be able to sustain their current vigour and influence in cyberspace.

Notes

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1. The Great Firewall refers to the system of Internet censorship enforced by the Chinese government to control contents in its domestic cyberspace and block out foreign sites such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and various foreign media.
2. Discussion threads were created on Weibo.com calling for boycott. Please see https://www.weibo.com/p/100808e8c877e980461f66175b6e4608fe7551/super_index (accessed 11 July 2018).
3. For instance, Facebook group titled "Diba Central Group Army (帝吧中央集团军)" available at https://www.facebook.com/groups/1101110389929793/, and Facebook comments under posts such as https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/posts/10153130814816065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/posts/10153129416971065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/photos/a.390960786064/10153130814416065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/photos/a.390960786064/10153130814411065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/photos/a.390960786064/10153130863236065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/posts/10153132757971065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/photos/a.390960786064/10153129416696065; https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/posts/10153133740766065 (accessed 5 June 2018).
4. Pink in Chinese culture is related to femininity.
5. In 2011, the patriotic group was infuriated by the liberal-leaning owner of Jinjiang site, who changed the serial number of their forum to 250 (which means "stupid" in Chinese) to insult them. Hence, the patriotic group left the Jinjiang site to set up their own site known as *Fengyi*. This change was too obscure to most people, who generally associate the Little Pinks with the pink-coloured Jinjiang site. Please see Fang, K. and Repnikova, M. (2018), "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The creation and evolution of a gendered label for nationalistic activists in China", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp. 2162-2185.
6. Emperor Forum, based in Baidu.com, is one of the forums that boasts the largest memberships on the site.
7. Base on a four-city survey and interviews, Qian, Xu and Chen (2017)'s study finds that patriotic historical education has only limited effects on inculcating nationalism and negative impression of Japan. This finding, however, does not exclude the possibility that the patriotic education could have some influence on the development of nationalism among certain segments of the young generation.
8. "Fifty-cent Party" is a group of netizens employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and were paid 50 cents for every positive comment on the CCP that they generated. For a study on Fifty-cent Party, please see King, G., Pan, J. and

Roberts, M.E. (2017), "How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 111, No. 3, pp. 484-501.

9. The targets of the Little Pinks' bombardment were *SET (Sanli) News* and *Apple Daily*, which were seen by the Little Pinks as pro-independence media.
10. See screenshots and recounts at:
https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%23%E6%96%97%E9%B1%BC%E7%9B%B4%E6%92%AD%E5%B8%9D%E5%90%A7fb%E5% 87%BA%E5%BE% 81%23,
http://news.kedo.gov.cn/c/2016-01-22/829770.shtml,
https://twitter.com/ResetTor/status/689760152996589568 (accessed 7 June 2018).
11. Information of the five groups are derived from recounts of participants on their social media posts or blogposts, screenshots, news reports and academic studies, including: Tang, J. (2016), Wangluo shequn de zhengzhi canyu yu jiti xingdong – yi FB "biaoqingbao dazhan" weili [Political Participation and Collective Action of Online Community: Take "Expression Package Wars" as a Case]. *Xinwen daxue* [*Journalism Bimonthly*] (3): 96-101; *Apple Daily* (2016, 21 January) Liangan wangyou zuida jiaoliu zhi ye [The Night of Massive Interactions between Netizens from Across the Straits. Available at: https://tw.appledaily.com/new/realtime/20160121/780114/ (accessed 4 June 2018); Netizen's recount by blogpost (2016, 21 January), available at: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_88d0c18b0102wc7k.html (accessed 4 June 2018).
12. Number of followers observed on May 2021.
13. The definition was put forth by a research done by *People's Daily* and subsequently adopted by the CYL. Please see Wang, X. and Zhu, M. (2016, 30 December) "Xiao fenhong" qunti shi ruhe jueqi de? [How did the "Little Pinks" arise?], *People's Daily*. Available at: http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1230/c405625-28990354.html (accessed 15 June 2018).
14. The Boxers are also known as *Yihetuan* or the "League of Harmony and Justice". They are members of a Chinese secret society that triggered the Boxer Rebellion in 1898 with violent actions against foreigners and Christians. Angry youths (or Fen Qings) are a group of young Chinese netizens mostly active in late 2000s and early 2010s. They tend to vent their dissatisfactions and angers with foreign or domestic affairs. Please see Yang L and Zheng Y (2012) Fen Qings (Angry Youth) in Contemporary China, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 21, No. 76, pp. 637-653.
15. When an entertainment program "Baozou Big News", popular among youth, was ordered to stop its broadcast on streaming sites like Bilibili, many netizens went online to express their rage. The program was known for its comedic and parody style, which were appealing to many Little Pinks. It had also expressed support for the Facebook Expedition.
16. Based on authors' observations.
17. The data are from Asian Barometer Survey conducted in China in 2015. The survey item that measured nationalism is "[o]ur country should defend our way of life instead of becoming more and more like other countries" and "How proud are you to be a citizen of China?" Answers to both questions are on a 4-point Likert scale. The index of nationalism is the arithmetic mean of the two items,

with larger values indicating higher level of nationalism. In Figure 2, differences between all the age groups are statistically significant ($p<0.01$ in one-way ANOVA test) except for the differences between “post-1990” and “post-1980”, and between “post-1970” and “post-1960”.

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