



Squid Game outside the wall: fandom nationalism in China and negotiation with state power

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Abstract

In the post-COVID era, the prevalence of “fandom nationalism” on Chinese social media has led to the development of two distinct attitudes toward *Squid Game* among Chinese netizens. Some nationalist netizens are dedicated to accusing *Squid Game* of plagiarism or dismissing it as a “cultural invasion.” Another group of fans, due to the ever-tightening Chinese Internet governance, use fandom nationalism as a disguise to protect themselves against cyberbullying by declaring an anti-Korean political stance before posting positive comments about *Squid Game*. Therefore, two such divergent attitudes eventually led to a negotiation between fan culture and state power, where on the one hand fandom nationalistic practices were accepted by the mainstream for party-state propaganda, but on the other, in order to prevent being censored, fan culture had to be subordinated to the state's governance.

Keywords: fandom nationalism, governance, Sino-Korean relations, social media, *Squid Game*

Since its release on Netflix in September 2021, *Squid Game* has generated a large following among Chinese audiences, especially pop culture fans who are influenced by the younger generations of netizens. From February 2022 to June 2022, I conducted a digital ethnography of Weibo and RED, social media commonly used by young Chinese netizens, to collect fans discussions (posted publicly from Sep 2021 to June 2022) following the hashtag #*Squid Game*, focusing on the conflicts between the two groups of fans who oppose and support *Squid Game*. I find that Chinese fans' comments on *Squid Game* are inextricably related to fandom nationalism in the post-COVID era. As Liu (2019, p. 126) defined, “fandom nationalism” means netizens love their nation in the way fans love their idols in Chinese media ecology. That is, in the context of cyber-nationalism, similar to idol culture, the nation becomes the object of unconditional worship and defense. Chinese netizens become fans of the nation, seeking to purge all negative comments against it on social media, and feuding with all potential competitors or threats to the nation.

I argue that *Squid Game* spurred in the younger generation of Chinese netizens two distinct opinions. One was from nationalistic fandom: fans took an anti-Korean attitude towards Korean cultural products and even Sino-Korean relations under the influence of Party-state propaganda. The other opinion was from the “disguised” nationalistic fans: fans developed self-censorship measures due to the continually tightening Party-state governance, stating their anti-Korean stance before posting comments on *Squid Game*. Thus, Party-state propaganda during post-COVID and the tightening governance on the Internet eventually caused these two divergent opinions to the same result: fandom nationalism inevitably won, and whether for or against Korean culture, Chinese netizens had to accept or pretend to accept the nationalism ideology to ensure that their stance was “correct.”

Squid Game and censorship

In recent years, the Chinese government has been issuing increasingly strict policies on the cultural industries. Overseas TV and web dramas, including *Squid Game*, are inaccessible to Chinese netizens because of the “Great Firewall” filtering many international websites. Fans' access to Netflix comes instead from VPN proxies—which Chinese netizens call “climbing over the wall.” However, the Chinese media's focus on criticizing the violent elements of *Squid Game* and the threat of Korean “cultural invasion”¹ has led many Chinese netizens to believe that it is a vulgar and toxic TV drama. Moreover, due to the long-standing disadvantaged position of fan culture in China and the increasing focus of Internet censorship on fans' comments, fans have established self-censorship when they express support for Korean cultural products on social media (Wang & Ge, 2022). Herein lies the origin of the two distinct opinions fans took regarding the discussion of *Squid Game*.

Two paths of fandom nationalism

Since COVID-19 began spreading globally in early 2020, Chinese draconian measures on the virus have significantly reduced the number of COVID-19 cases, outstripping the containment gains in Europe and the US. As a result, a great deal of official media highlighting the superiority of the Chinese party-state's political system and expressing cynicism about Western measures to contain the virus have inflated cyber-nationalist sentiment and even showed a tendency of extremism in the Chinese cyber-space (Zhang & Xu, 2022). Cyber-nationalism also infiltrated fan culture and gave rise to fandom nationalism.

Fandom nationalism was first seen with the Diba Expeditions of 2016 (Liu, 2019). Meant as a patriotic action,

nationalistic netizens “climbed over the wall” to attack the Facebook pages of Tsai Ing-wen (Taiwan’s president) and several Taiwanese newspapers, using emojis and self-made memes as their weapons. Such nationalistic collective action, based on fan practice, focuses on flooding the enemy’s social media pages through fan conflicts (like the war of emojis/memes), washing away all unfavorable comments. Therefore, spontaneous cyber-nationalism, manifested by collective fan action, became an important weapon of party-state propaganda (Gries, 2007; Han, 2015, 2019).

During the post-COVID era, fandom nationalism manifested itself on social media and anchored itself on the rejection of foreign cultural products as a cultural threat. When *Squid Game* was popular among Chinese students in the last half of 2021, a teacher posted these words in November 2021 on Weibo:

As a primary school teacher, I was shocked to hear my students recite the lines from *Squid Game* in the restroom today. I asked my students where they saw the play [*sic*], and they said there were many short videos on TikTok. Korean culture is so pervasive. This is where being a teacher comes in handy. I prohibited my students from spreading *Squid Game* on campus and rushed to nip the Hallyu idea in the bud! I not only popularized the “theft country’s” cultural plagiarism, even the THAAD system and the Chinese restrictions on Korean elements!

“Theft country,” a contemptuous term used by netizens for South Korea, comes from the online hostility and conflicts in recent years regarding the debate over Chinese and Korean traditions. The social media sites, for extremely high hits, are happy to promote Korea’s supposed plagiarism and appropriation² of Chinese culture, which in the post-COVID era became a trigger for furious fandom nationalist sentiment. Such negative impressions have gradually developed into a general criticism of Korean cultural products on social media. On Weibo, for example, faced with news of the huge success of *Squid Game* around the world, some fans said in the comments section:

I often see people envy the theft country’s cultural output, but both *Squid Game* and K-pop are not Korea’s own culture, [they are] are copied from Japanese comics and American pop music. So, things that are not their own can be called cultural output? (Fan 1, Weibo.com, June 2022)
So what if *Squid Game* is popular, is that not still plagiarism in Japanese anime? (Fan 2, Weibo.com, June 2022)

Of course, there are also a number of Chinese netizens who are willing to support *Squid Game*. They analyzed the reasons for its success while also reflecting on China’s cultural policies. Their social media statements, however, face a delicate dilemma—they are vulnerable to being cyberbullied and even reported by the nationalistic netizens to the administrators of social media platforms for censorship. Since Chinese social media accounts are registered by users’ real names, being cyberbullied may lead to troubles in real life. Thus, fans utilize reporting to attack the “enemies” who have different opinions is inextricably linked to China’s Internet governance (Wang & Ge, 2022). In recent years, the Chinese government has introduced increasingly stringent cultural policies to regulate fan culture on various online platforms. In 2016, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) launched a series of campaigns on the Chinese Internet known as “Qinglang Xingdong” (Sweep-Up campaign) (CAC, 2016). In July 2020 the CAC stated that it would “pay close attention

to fans’ blind idolization of stars and fans’ conflicts” (CAC, 2020). As a result, fan culture in China has become the object of censorship and has been portrayed as the antithesis of the mainstream, so the comments of some fandoms are easily labeled as “unpatriotic” or “corrupted by toxic Hallyu.” Therefore, some netizens take the path of “disguised” fandom nationalism—stating their anti-Korean stance before their comments. For example, in May 2022, Eileen Gu, China’s Winter Olympic skiing gold medalist, and Jeong Ho-Yeon, the lead actress of *Squid Game*, posted photos together on Instagram, which quickly went viral on RED and Weibo and sparked heated arguments among Chinese “disguised nationalist” fans:

First, I hate Korea, but this actress does have higher international popularity than Eileen, so it’s understandable the fashion show would take her more seriously. (Fan 3, RED, May 2022)

Although I don’t like Korea, I have to say Korean export of cultural products is indeed more successful, as evidenced by the fact that their actresses are valued more, so shouldn’t we also reconsider our cultural policies? (Fan 4, Weibo, May 2022)

(...) Despite my lack of affection for the country, the theme is so much in my love that I watched all in one day. The complexities of human nature explored through the game brought me to tears. (Fan 5, RED, May 2022)

It seems contradictory that a non-political complimentary comment about a Korean drama is preceded by an anti-Korean statement. These comments are more like a performance to display “correctness” to the nationalists and avoid censorship or adverse impacts on their lives. When these fans disguise themselves as nationalists, their statements of political stance become an “amulet” to avoid being cyberbullied or reported by the nationalistic fans.

Conclusion

The success of *Squid Game* has triggered a marvelous chain reaction in China. In the post-COVID era, the attitudes of Chinese netizens towards *Squid Game* are related to the interactive relations between fan culture and party-state governance, Sino-Korean relations, and the grand narratives of nationalism. Two divergent attitudes eventually led to a negotiation between fan culture and state power, where on the one hand fandom nationalistic actions were employed by the mainstream as weapons for party-state propaganda; but on the other, fans have to play the role of nationalists to prevent being censored, which led Chinese fan culture to be subordinated to the powerful governance of state power. The “disguised” nationalist ideology has, to some extent, fueled the flames of cyber-nationalism and made the Internet ecology increasingly extremist, leaving fan culture more vulnerable and marginalized.

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NOTES

1. E.g. the commentary on qq.com, “Did you see the cultural invasion behind *Squid Game* that is sweeping the world?” <https://xw.qq.com/cmsid/20211012A064WY00>
2. The imagination of Korea as a “theft country” focuses on the perception that Korea has plagiarised and appropriated Chinese cultural heritage, such as the origins of kimchi, hanfu and the Dragon boat festival (see <https://jikipedia.com/definition/418868189>, 2021).

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