

“I Feel Affronted by His Smile!”: Chinese Netizen Reactions to State-Promoted Star-Making in the Case of Tenzing Tsondu

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Abstract: To elucidate how Chinese netizens reacted to the state promotion of the Tibetan young idol (Tenzing Tsondu), this study analyzed 2,000 posts from Zhihu, a biggest question-and-answer website in China. The analysis shows that 1) netizens generated dissidence by poaching the mainstream discourse; 2) netizens imaginarily instrumentalized Tenzing for political use, which were characterized with nationalistic and racist discourse; 3) repulsion to entertainment served as a way to convey civil spirit to resist media hegemony. This article thus contributes to a better understanding of Chinese online dissidence, online political expressions, and the convergence of entertainment and cyber-politics.

1. Introduction

A 7-second clip taken by a tourist photographer casually, at the end of 2020, filming the innocent and bright smile of a 20-year-old Tibetan young man, Tenzing Tsondu (Fig. 1), known widely as (Ding Zhen) in Chinese, exploded on Douyin (a Chinese video-focused social networking platform) in a few hours [1]. From then on, his good looks with purity and wildness, embellished by the highest-altitude magnificent scenery, continued to take social media by storm, particularly the Twitter-like Sina Weibo.



Fig.1 Screenshot from the Douyin Video That Made Tenzing Popular

As statistics show, there were more than 2.5 million pieces of online-published information related to him in about 20 days; the hashtags associated with him on Weibo, because various governmental accounts on that platform piggybacked on his in-vogue moment, had been trending and viewed almost 5 billion times (Li, 2020)[2]. Even the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, released three consecutive tweets about him to the audience overseas with pictures and introductions of his smiling, horse-riding, and Tibetan news broadcasting. As a result, his life trajectory has been altered dramatically from a little-known Tibetan youngster to the hottest idol in

China. In his hometown (Litang), he signed on as the tourist ambassador and was employed by a local state-owned enterprise. Further, he has been invited to perform at the gala of China Central Television (TV), variety shows on local TVs, and even represented the country by giving a speech at the United Nations (UN).

Nonetheless, the story of overnight fame has gone unexpectedly. Resentments have vehemently targeted the sweet-faced heartthrob that netizens blast for the state-promoted star-making. It can be widely captured across social media platforms in China. For example, a viral meme that has lasted till today is named “*Yi Yan Ding Zhen*” (YYDZ) (Tenzing at a Glance) in Baidu Tieba (a Reddit-like Chinese bulletin board). It originated from extensive compliments for his “uncontaminated” eyes with the untouched nature of the Tibetan plateau far away from the urban-modern society, while appropriated in parodies using homophonic puns in Chinese to deconstruct the mainstream-defined aesthetic of authenticity (Fig. 2).



Fig.2 Examples of “Yydz” Meme Mocking Tenzing Posted to Baidu Tieba

Furthermore, the way in which Tenzing – a Tibetan young man who dropped out of primary school, cannot speak Mandarin, and is almost illiterate – became the most high-profile celebrity was regarded by some as the “epitome of superficiality” (Teh, 2022)[3]. Some netizens were dismayed that he catapulted to fame effortlessly by his good looks and minority origin, while they were uphill struggling in the study-and-work meritocracy yet still confronting career precariousness. Therefore, Tenzing became an outlet of public animadversion on social media and was subjected to daily mocking. Besides, as his popularity continued, a string of negative news and gossip about his character have been dug out and percolated, notably over vaping and wearing luxuries during live streaming and sexual scandals of his relatives. These went against his initially idealized image and were sometimes references in mocking memes (Fig. 3).



Fig.3 Examples of Meme Mocking Tenzing’s Smoking Posted to Baidu Tieba

The disputes around Tenzing provide a valuable lens to investigate how cyberactivism and social grievance converge to challenge the state propaganda that often defines role expectations for the youth and “persuades” them in a top-down manner (Graziani, 2019; Tan & Cheng, 2020), and attains “ideological coherence between audience and authority” to culturally tame the society (Fung

& Pung, 2016, p.92). Thereby, this article sheds light on the online response to the “Tenzing effect” to examine how the audience reacted to propagandist messages.[4-6]

To answer the research question above, I analyzed a total of 2,000 answers posted under 20 Tenzing-related questions in Zhihu. The analysis shows that 1) netizens generated dissidence by poaching the mainstream discourse; 2) netizens imaginarily instrumentalized Tenzing for political use, which were characterized with nationalistic and racist discourse; 3) repulsion to entertainment served as a way to convey civil spirit to resist media hegemony. In the following sections, 1) I will start with the literature review and introduce the research method to set up the foundation for this article; 2) then, by qualitatively analyzing the data corpus, I will present my findings to illuminate how the Chinese netizens impugn the official propaganda in terms of state-promoted star-making; 3) consequently, I will provide a concluding discussion for the nuanced picture this research might contribute to ongoing scholarly debates.

2. Social Media, Political Expression, and Dissidence in China

The advent of social media with low cost and high dissemination possibilities (Earl & Kimport, 2011) [7] was evidenced to set netizens on a pathway toward political expressions that spawned expressive citizenship (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014).[8] It helped individuals effectively frame political issues and extract information (Yamamoto, Kushin & Dalisay, 2015)[9], facilitating political participation in the real world (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers & Neely, 2010; Vaccari et al., 2015)[10,11]. This trend has been pronounced among the young generation (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik & Maoz, 2015)[12], as Moffett and Rice (2018, p.22)[13] insisted that the online civic resources and the recruitment networks enabled by social media promote the youth to become more engaging with political talks. In this thread, some have recently focused on the online expressive spaces and contents that are not explicitly political, highlighting the importance of non-political online affinity networks as a significant locus and creativity as a way to express politically (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018)[14]. For example, youth popular culture can function as shared symbolic resources to prompt political expression and communication within and across political differences (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021)[15]. As Penney (2020) suggested[16], the way, the youth express themselves politically - posting political memes and humor online - helped them build connections with like-minded peers and strengthen the communal identity to cope with the day-to-day challenges of the political world.

In a specific context in China, the heavy censorship and other forms of repression framed as “networked authoritarianism” (Chan, 2019; MacKinnon, 2011)[17,18] have been broadly functioning in integrating state ruling into cyberspace. These findings, as mentioned above, held a skeptical stance on the expectation of an emergent Internet-enabled “civil society” that some studies proposed (e.g., Yang, 2003)[19]. In Comparison, some have also explored the networked practices in everyday resistance and alternative discourse within a speech-controlled environment (Meng, 2011; Yang & Guo, 2015)[20,21]. And by subtle tactics, such as “mundane expression” with shared understandings, civic actors can circumvent authorities’ blockages online and mobilize the mass to participate in contentious politics (Liu, 2015)[22]. Moreover, the online dissidence in China often blends entertainment and political activism. Although this type of political expression maybe not be as serious as the rational ideal in the Habermasian public space, it nonetheless temporarily challenges the power hierarchy (Li, 2011; Yang, Tang & Wang, 2015)[23,24]. Because due to “the distributed, anonymous and participatory nature” of Internet-based communication (Tai, 2015, p. 129)[25], activists can be connected, produce alternative discourse (Liao, 2019)[26], and sustain collective resistance in the cultural space of social media (Mao, 2020)[27].

3. Fandom, Participatory Culture, and Chinese Politics

Burwell and Boler (2008) contended fan activities are intersected with political practices and turn out to be “a convergence of imaginative performance, cultural consumption and collective engagement” (p.2). They indicated the participatory culture in fan activism, as Jenkins (2006a)

maintained: they are not passive receptors but active participants that “seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content”(p.3). Jenkins (2006b) claimed that the fandom “transform[s] personal reaction into social reaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture”, leads those culturally and socially isolated by patriarchal society and dominant media to feel a sense of belonging, to acquire dignity and respect in the broader fan-exclusive network, to restore freedom and excitement that were repressed in the ordinary life, to “escape” from the mundane into the “marvelous” (p.41-42). Within this context, civic awareness and engagement have been manifested in forms of popular culture, transferring “a changed sense of community, a greater sense of participation, less dependence on official expertise and a greater trust in collaborative problem solving” to prompt the changes in the political process (Jenkins, 2006a, p.209). The fan-subjectivity and autonomy were also manifested in the fan-media relations, while should not be positioned in the center of media convergence, as Booth (2015) modestly suggested that the negotiation, navigation, and adjustment between media fans and the media industry must be conducted to keep up with the changing technological discourse in the virtually mediated world[28-33].

The discussion around fan participation in China was waged with focuses on homosociality in the fan-fiction community that projects homosexual imagination into celebrities (Yang & Bao, 2012; Zhao, 2017)[34], interrelations between the social media logic (e.g., datafication) and fan activities (Fung, 2019; Yin & Xie, 2021)[35,36], etc. Moreover, the participatory culture in China has proved that it worked to sustain the civic spirit and political expressions (Yin & Fung, 2017)[37]. Also, the networked participation within the fan community is functional in facilitating personal interactions and social connections and more profoundly informing people “how individuals can become civically involved in ways that are not explicitly directed by the government” (Jeffreys & Xu, 2017)[38]. As an observation into fan activism of online translation communities showcased, driven by the volunteerism and do-it-yourself spirit, the participatory culture and civic engagement have emerged through collaborative fan activities, while the political values of online knowledge sharing in a highly controlled circumstance should be cautiously doubted (Zhang & Mao, 2013)[39].

Some views recently arose to illuminate the entanglement between fan activism and Chinese politics. Huang and Xie (2021) found that the media texts that transcultural fans poached from foreign television series served as satirical resources to construct political discourse and engage in local political contestation. Their findings echoed the argument of political satires in China in earlier scholarly works that regarded these networked practices as the reflection of the symbolic power of the governed (Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011) and opening up a space for resistant discourse to emerge and flourish under the authoritarian pressure (Tang & Yang, 2011). Additionally, a set of studies evidenced the interrelation between fan activities and political activism, that is, fan tactics employed in pro-state nationalistic campaigns in geopolitical conflicts, such as encouraging people to “love their nation the way fans love their idols” (Liu, 2019, p.126). Put it concretely, the sophisticated strategies and media literacy developed in routinized fan practices (e.g., the image maintenance of idol) has been used in political issues; fans recoded the nationalist discourse into affective and “cute” symbol systems and replaced “war” and “conspiracy” in international politics with “love” and “idea” (Wu, Li & Wang, 2019).[40-45]

Nevertheless, despite the nexus of political critics and popular culture, the emerging literature has shed light on how online fan activism is regulated and embedded into the state’s ideological orientation. Some scholars focused on the state policies for platforms where fans aggregated to perform rituals, maintain collective solidarity, and “actualize the abstract affect or desire with material and economic rewards” (Yin, 2021, p. 472)[46]. In the infrastructural process of platforms, the “state transformed from a regulator to stakeholder, hoping to make platforms serve for national interest spontaneously” (Zhang, 2021, p.16)[47]. This governance model was referred to as “coercive co-opting”, whereby users and platforms made efforts to act in accordance with the imaginaries and ideologies of the state, and fans participated “in the governance over themselves in the form of ‘self-purification’” (Liao & Fu, 2022, p.2)[48]. These state controls and repressions continued the concerns about the political precariousness of fan organizations and “cult-like”

devotion to a remote media personality (Jenkins, 2018)[49].

In spite of the differing focuses shown above, there is insufficient research about the engagement of the Chinese state in fan activism, particularly regarding state-promoted star-making. Importantly, it remains unknown how the young generation reacts to the propagandist involvement in the fan culture and relates it to social inequalities in a broader sense. Distinct from and scarcely seen in existing studies, this research, by checking out online discussions around Tenzing’s story, elaborates how the netizen’s reaction to state-promoted star-making in the digital age turns out.

4. Methods

4.1 Platform Description

This article relied on data collected from the social media platform Zhihu, the question-and-answer (Q&A) website enlivened by vast user-generated content to become the largest knowledge-sharing community in China. According to yearlong monitoring data since March 2021 (iResearch, 2022), the site’s monthly unique visitors fluctuated slightly around 70 million. And it is a popular website among well-educated young adults (more than 80% of users in Zhihu had a bachelor’s degree or above) living in the developed region of China (iResearch, 2018, 2022). Unlike the aim of swiftly transmitting information or enabling daily-life sharing on other platforms, Zhihu posts normally focus more on in-depth expertise, logically grounded and analytic interpretations, and professional content (Chi, 2021). Importantly, it is also a politically expressive space where the intellectuals debate domestic and international political issues (See Peng & Chen, 2021; Peng, Zhang, Cummings & Zhang, 2020). Though censorship, in some cases, often works to ban some politically sensitive words and inhibit political expression on this site, there is much expressive enthusiasm for politics to anchor and lead the trend of cyber-political culture in China (See BBC, 2020)[50-56].

4.2 Data Collection

Table 1. Top 20 Tenzing-related questions on Zhihu

Ranking Number	Question Titles (Ordered by Platform Algorithm)
1	Why are you disgusted with Tenzing?
2	Why do the Tieba males hate and scold Tenzing universally?
3	What do you think of Tenzing using iPhone 12?
4	What does the Tibetan think about the Khampa man, Tenzing, rising to fame?
5	What do you think of Tenzing joining in <i>Day Day Up</i> ?
6	What do you think of Tenzing giving a speech for Earth Day in the United Nations?
7	Why can some people accept Huanong Brother but not Tenzing?
8	Do you really hate Tenzing for his domination of treading?
9	What do you think of Tenzing being selected to perform in the CCTV Spring Festival Network Gala?
10	What do you think of the media commentary? <i>Why do the Small-Town Swot take it out on Tenzing?</i>
11	What do you think of the Weibo trending of “Some Men’s Attitude for Tenzing”?
12	Do girls all like Tenzing?
13	What do you think of Tenzing’s suspected speech at the United Nations
14	What do you think of the Khampa man, Tenzing’s explosive popularity?
15	Have you listened to Tenzing’s newly released song, <i>1367 All Wishes Come True</i> , and what do you feel?
16	How to evaluate the netizen’s revelation that some of Tenzing’s sasaeng fans slept with his uncle and fellow villagers to get close to him?
17	Why do so many people scold Tenzing?
18	What is your expectation for Tenzing’s performance in <i>Day Day Up</i> ?
19	Why does talking about Tenzing would be disliked or objected to by so many people? Do their reasons make sense?
20	What do you think of the Khampa man, Tenzing’s tourism promotional film shooting for his hometown, Litang?

To acquire a solid data corpus, I entered the keyword (i.e., Tenzing) in the search box and got to

the page displaying all the results, namely, questions, columns, and videos (this study only focused on the Q&A interaction and thus excluded the latter two). I manually collected the top 100 answers (ordered by the algorithm) from the top 20 questions (see Table 1; questions with fewer than 100 answers were left out) and ended up with 2,000 answers. The way in which ordered “questions and answers” by the algorithm reflected the way ordinary users who are interested in this topic would encounter this content. Among the 20 questions, most of them were in line with the typical questioning modes on Zhihu (i.e., “what do you think”, “how to evaluate”; Dudarenok, 2018)[57], calling for individualized viewpoints on public figures, phenomena, and policies. According to ethical research norms, identifiable user information will not be included in this article, and all content will be anonymized. All Zhihu posts were in Chinese, and those included in this article were translated for this purpose.

4.3 Data Analysis

To grasp subjective opinions of online expressions and identify dissimilarities among them, the data corpus was qualitatively analyzed by employing thematic analysis in order to “elucidate[e] the specific nature of a given group’s conceptualization” (Joffe, 2012, p. 212). In doing so, my focus was on perceiving and clarifying both explicit and implicit ideas within data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011) to identify, organize, interpret and provide insights into patterns of meaning (themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2012)[58-60].

After poring over the entire data corpus, in the coding stage, I used the theoretical approach that focused on what was relevant to my specific research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, the text - “I object to the propaganda department relentlessly touting Tenzing, because he does not contribute to the nation and society; the ones our propaganda used to publicize were dedicated heroes making great contribution to our country” - was coded as “wanting to see meritorious figures in propaganda”. Further, after finishing the classification for all my coding results, I searched, reviewed, defined, and finalized three themes (i.e., dissidence by showing compliance, imagining to instrumentalize Tenzing for political uses, and repulsion to fandom entertainment) that made up the key features of online political expression in this case[61].

5. Findings

5.1 “We Have Been Betrayed”: Dissidence by Showing Compliance

Found in the dataset, the collectivist discourse - stemmed from the state-advocated ideology of collectivism that used to be revered as cultural templates for socialist subjectivity (Keane, 2001) and the highest noble morality (Zhou, 2002) - was leveraged by dissidents to illegitimize the state promotion of the young idol. However, my findings also show that what was behind netizens’ moral judgment was the pile-up grievance for the social stagnation in the present-day: they contrasted the struggling in life experience - including academic competition and employment market - with “inequality nature” that they sensitized in Tenzing’s meteoric rise. In these expressions, they demonstrated how deserving they were according to the mainstream-determined evaluation, while they still cannot gain satisfactory returns[62-63].

Specifically, the state-backed stardom of Tenzing was regarded as undermining the long-held belief about who should be foregrounded as a propagandist figure. Hence, the collectivist norms on which the propaganda of the Chinese state placed emphasis for decades, such as “the spirit of devotion” and “contribution to society and nation”, were being invoked by netizens to impugn the “superficial” young idol and highlighting the line-crossing wrongdoings of state promotion.

In response to the question “Why do the Tieba males hate and scold Tenzing universally?”, for example, Zhihu user ZooGreg garnering thousands of likes, started with a claim that “I do not object to Tenzing shooting to fame, but the endorsement of official media for him”, and then gave many examples frequently eulogized in official press and mass education. To illustrate, one of the examples that ZooGreg brought up was Wang Jinxi, a socialist hero praised for opening the oil field amidst dreadful natural conditions to make new-founded China self-sufficient in oil. ZooGreg wrote

further:

You have to know who our official media used to advertise... From men to women, from wood-cutter to the Party secretary... They became role models in the national propaganda because of their selfless dedication but not simply good looks, yet is Tenzing qualified?

Besides recognizing self-sacrificing heroic figures, the meaning of collectivist-ideology propaganda also rests on encouraging role-modeling. Netizens thought it was misguided that the state ballyhooed Tenzing rather than the ones who devoted themselves and remain uncelebrated. As Zhihu user Kate-Catty described:

I am bitterly disappointed with the official authorities... Everybody always believes that the role models - playing a vanguard role for the people - eligible to appear in the state propaganda are persevering, capable, experienced, and magnanimous, such as those who take roots in poverty-alleviation, female education, and cultural inheritance in rural areas...

Educating people by modeling meritorious images in propaganda was deemed conducive to the collective, but the overnight fame of the young idol collided with what they wished. As Zhihu user Reed-Roman scathingly questioned, "There are so many heroic figures merited to be known, but you feed us Tenzing? Does the national future rely on good-looking illiterates?" In this regard, Zhihu user Larry-Jim expostulated against the media hype of Tenzing and gained almost 30 thousand likes by arguing that it embodied a twisted and skin-deep value that trampled the traditional virtues and customs. He warned that our society would swallow the bitter pill of sensationalizing a young man unable to make commensurate contributions to society. Then, a story about the ones - working on environmental protection and poverty alleviation, and he considered were entitled to media attention - was given:

I have met so many unknown philanthropists working so hard yet not getting any media attention... My peers have devoted themselves to returning the forest to golden monkeys and other wild inhabitants by changing the means of living of residents from hunting and logging (destructive to the environment) to beekeeping and growing herbs (more environmentally friendly)... If they have the attention like Tenzing, how meaningful it will be ah!

Nonetheless, instead of demanding media exposure for the eligible figures, there was a thread of dissidence grounded on personalized stories in life that depicted their anxieties about upward class mobility and lodged complaints against social inequalities. Their storytelling drew out arguments that Tenzing's rise circumvented the homogeneous competitions they had to engage in, by which they raged at being treated unfairly and the circumstance that burned them out. For example, bearing the username, Nance-Star - who was born in a mountainous and poverty-stricken area and taught that education was everything - described these contrasts:

Since I was in junior high school, every day, I have never gotten up after 6:30 a.m. For my life prospect, I could do nothing but study hard, which was also the only way for many of my home fellows. Still, many of them were eliminated in the fierce academic competition and thus had no choice but to enter factories as cheap labor... The intense promotion let me know about Tenzing. He got praise and reward without any effort... His emergence is crazy. I was so jealous yet angrier.

Netizens aired dissidence by expressing how compliant they were with the mainstream ideology (e.g., studying and working hard) to portray themselves as victims and spotlight the injustice they perceived. Imperatively, their grievances stressed themselves were more qualified to get state promotion than Tenzing. For example, Zhihu user XeneLeeds hurled accusations at the editorial that a state-owned press (*China Youth Daily*) released to blame the "small-town swot" for taking frustrations out on Tenzing:

Yes, I am jealous of Tenzing, through and through. He has a skyrocketing rise in life effortlessly, while I preserve in the hard study for ten and some years and still in vain compete with his appearance. I am jealous of his state-promoted background... How about us, we small-town swot? Does anyone care about us? It is we who promote the science-technology progress for the nation. It is we who make the nation strong. It is we work hard every day under tremendous pressure...Not him!

The compliance to mainstream ideology was also presented in showing their merits (i.e., integrity, kindness, and responsibility). These posts characterized an impeccable profile in comparison to the effortlessness of the young idol. For example, an answer from Zhihu user Leevin attracted 34 thousand likes. He described himself as a softhearted man but commented searingly on Tenzing's rise:

I am working harder, more knowledgeable, learned, and mature... than Tenzing. I ever relieved victims in earthquake disasters and made donations during pandemic hits... I am willing to accompany the one I love to grow up and be mature and take care of her whole life. I am willing to buy medicine for her when she has her period, and tell her stories while holding her... But when Tenzing emerged, girls were dazzled and infatuated... State media and official mouthpieces actively stood up for him... What do we abominate? What infuriates us? Is it due to Tenzing? No! We loathe this world of warped value! We are outraged because we have been humiliated!

Netizens showed much compliance to the mainstream ideology (i.e., studying and working hard to achieve moving up social stratum, being upright and kind in life, etc.) to highlight that they felt betrayed by Tenzing's sudden fame. By that, they criticized the state involvement of the young idol as relaying a wrong value and exacerbate the social inequalities, piquing discussions of social stagnation.

5.2 “We Admit We Are Worthless”: Tibetan Identity, Nationalism, and Racism

While never officially owned up that the rarely seen state-promoted star-making for an ethnic minority was out of political considerations, netizens' posts, it was said to use Tenzing's Tibetan identity for political purposes overseas and at home. My findings in this theme manifest that Tenzing was imaginarily instrumentalized 1) as a discursively constructed equivalent “weapon” playing with the “Western enemy”; 2) as a symbol showing to other ethnic-minority groups for the sake of maintaining the ethnic majority-minority power relations. The rhetoric of the former shared similarities with the right-wing populist discourse in the Western context but differently emanated from the nationalistic desires popular among Chinese netizens to rewriting the West-dominated world order. The latter conveyed a sense of racist stereotype, which patriarchally discredited the ethnic-minority unrest and independent activism as detrimental to the Chinese nation and hoped to create Tenzing as an obedient example benefiting from being tamed.

Before penetrating why Tenzing was imagined as an equivalence of discursive construction, it is helpful to know a scornful phrase, “white left”, frequently appeared in a sort of Tenzing-related Zhihu answers. The term, indeed, has been popular in Chinese online political discussions, mainly regarding the societal and political issues in the West. Resemble “social justice warriors”, it is coined and utilized to disparage the “liberal elites” “who endorse the progressive value such as feminism, multiculturalism, equal right movement” (Zhang, 2020, p. 96). Those being satirized in this Chinese neologism are considered as “naive, simple-minded and ignorant to the real problems in the world” or “corrupt, deceptive and hypocritically endorsing progressive ideas only to stay in power”, which overlaps with right-wing populist discourse in the West (ibid, p. 99; See also Zhang, 2017). In response to questions associated with Tenzing giving a speech - entitled “*The Story of Me and My Animal Friends*” in the UN, some Zhihu users released realistic/pragmatic attitudes to belittle the value of egalitarian initiatives (e.g., gender and racial equality and receiving refugees)[64-66]:

There are persecuted African women who speak at the UN and are praised, arousing sympathy in the West. There are persecuted refugees who speak at the UN... But have these speeches changed anything? Bluntly speaking, it is just a show (Zhihu user Neville-Cark).

No need to take the UN too seriously. It has been dominated by the “white left”. As long as you got a bit thing associated with feminism, environmentalism, and lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans stuff, you can speak there. The UN guys do not work on any real and serious matters yet simply have fun with the “white left” (Zhihu user CarlosMe).

Significantly, Tenzing was in line with features in which the so-called “white left” will be

interested because he - coming from an exotic and peripheral culture and close to natural ecosystem away from urban-industrial civilization - was imagined as the representation of multicultural mosaic, animal welfare, and environmentalism. As Zhihu user Bill-Cam characterized Tenzing as the “tags aggregation” that could pander to the “white left” tastes:

Let us think about what tags Tenzing has, including Tibetan minority and herdsman, with which he was born. He also has talents to acquire the tags like environmental and animal protection, ethnic custom and language, and religious custom... Most of these are the ones that can thrill the Westerners by just looking.

Therefore, Tenzing was deemed a discursively equivalent “tool” able to engage in the “white left” dialogue seamlessly. As a Zhihu user, BalocaTB, using a famous saying of Greta Thunberg (a Swedish environmentalist youth activist), wrote a rebuke letter to US President Joe Biden and suggested Tenzing speak out in his speech at the UN:

Dear Biden, HOW DARE YOU! You and your government allowed Japan to discharge polluted water of the Fukushima nuclear power station. Those radioactive water will damage plenty of animals and also human beings. So, HOW DARE YOU!

BalocaTB added that as Tenzing had tags like “ethnic minority” and “animal welfare”, those of which are pure and potent “protective film” in the “hypocrisy” of Western political correctness, the US definitely cannot deal with Tenzing’s accusation well. It shows that they neither genuinely approve of Tenzing nor the normative terms of liberal democracy in the Western context. Instead, they hoped to instrumentalize Tenzing, a Tibetan boy supposed to have the potential to be an analogous product to participate in the International dialogues, which are deemed as dominated by the hypocritically-humanitarian “liberal elites” in the West. As some complacently made teasing comments below:

It is using magic (Tenzing) to beat magic (Western liberal norms) (Zhihu user CatalinaFG)

I am so relieved to see my country to have hooligan actions as what the West has done” (Zhihu user, DaveCreeps)

If Tenzing is a female, it will be better as he can have another politically correct leverage (i.e. feminism). You (Western “liberal elitist”) like this? Okay, I feed the same shit to you.

Indeed, the “white left” gibe often materialistically essentializes the normative terms of liberal democracy as the irrational and destructive political correctness that is insignificant to economic growth and social/national security, which is to highlight the superiority of the realist authoritarianism of the Chinese regime achieving the “economic miracle” (Zhang, 2020). More centrally, the antipathy against the “liberal elite” in Chinese cyberspace is interwoven with the nationalistic sentiment revolting against the liberal-hegemonic world order; and the West is perceived as a bully with seemingly moral-right reasons (e.g., human rights and receiving refugees) to disdain China condescendingly, interfere in internal affairs and disrespect sovereignty (ibid). It has been interpreted as a way that the declining West thwarts rising China to maintain its gradually elapsing hegemony. As a result, within the either-or binary, Tenzing was imagined as an equivalent weapon to fight back. For example, Zhihu user Jackomar analyzed Tenzing’s role within international frictions with the West that was viewed as a rancorous accuser and opponent[67]:

Tenzing, in fact, has outstanding leverages for us to show worldwide our stand and efforts in [maintaining] ethnic unity and real situations of the ethnic minorities that are completely contrasted to the malicious calumny overseas. We need him, a figure with popularity, to be our channel to speak out... Speaking once again, the Sino-West competition in the wind of International opinion has been heating up; we ordinary people have to stay alert and cannot act as cat’s paw for our enemy.

Besides, a series of expressions also emphasized the young idol’s political implication on domestic ethnic issues, which depicted him as a political symbol for other ethnic minority groups. In this thread, netizens spotlighted their concerns about the restless multi-ethnic society and the state’s overriding demands to sustain political legitimacy in the ethnic minority area. As Zhihu user Leyendeck explained, “it is for the stability maintenance in our nation; promoting Tenzing is a have-to-do task, as there are various threats of independence”. Whereas, it is worth noting that their

desires to maintain ethnic unity were patriarchally framing ethnic minority groups as the ones who should be obedient. Hence, their acceptance of Tenzing was hoping to shape him as “the kid who got candy” and show that to other ethnic minorities. These sayings, discrediting ethnic unrest and pro-independence activism in China, shaped the ethnic minority groups as the “other” - who should be tamed - in Chinese society, and showcased a racial stereotype aiming to sustain the status quo in the ethnic majority-minority power imbalance. For example, Zhihu user Jesmondvv explicated the symbolic significance in appeasing ethnic unrest:

Promoting Tenzing as an idol is for the specific audiences - those ethnics that are always bought over, incited, and beguiled to destabilize our nation. The demonstration effect of [Tenzing’s success] is quite straightforward. That is, you guys do not have to work hard, struggle, and suffer hardships. But just being friendly, keep innocence and authenticity in your eyes, you guys will get wealth, reputation, and status... So, no need to follow the demagogue to seek trouble for yourself. Be friendly, you will be rich, isn’t that good?

Consequently, Tenzing’s unique roles above explain why the Zhihu expressions in this theme were comparatively moderate, distinct from outrages, complaints, and the verbal violence shown in the first theme section. Whereas, it is not said that netizens focusing on Tenzing’s Tibetan identity did not sense the “unequal nature” of his state-promoted rise. Rather, they often evaluated the ethnic majority-minority comparison within the ranking of the “value of the United Front”, or *tongzhan jiazhi* in Chinese, which justified the preferential treatment of ethnic minority groups. As Zhihu user Haman-GK illustrated by comparing Tenzing to American Indians:

A white Texan finds himself working so hard while the media are touting a “pure and innocent” Indian boy who has made no effort at all. The boy, simply because of his Indian face, has access to resources you white Texan will never get in your whole life. At this moment, you white guys get crushed... As long as you are not a minority or Indian, your working effort and [life] stability only reduce your value of United Front.

However, despite acknowledging the “insignificance” of being the majority in China, netizens were still willing to agree on Tenzing’s state-endorsed rise. As some users described:

Tenzing is an “agenda” that the propaganda department purposefully set to shut the Western mouth that presses us to receive refugees, displaying our supportive policies for ethnic minorities. It is a progress in our international-oriented propaganda... We indeed cannot match him in this (Zhihu user Star-Chaser).

If Tenzing comes from Xinjiang, he is probably also able to enjoy a promotion like this. But if he is a Han young man, sorry, it will be a totally different story no matter how handsome and pure he is. [For that reason], I always persuade those youngsters who feel aggrieved, to forget about it... do not compare yourself to Tenzing (Zhihu user Hawk-Rock).

5.3 “I Refuse to Consume Him”: Fandom Entertainment and Civil Spirit

Netizens conveyed a civil spirit in resisting the media hegemony of state-capital collusion by repulsion to fandom entertainment and star-making. These expressions pointed to the tension between fan entertainment and serious discussion, as well as the tension between the web, especially social media, as an empowered public space, and state control. To illustrate, in their post, media hegemony was presented as the manipulation of cramming the entertainment information into public space yet quieting down the discordance. In this case, the Tenzing-related information exploded in the short term to overflow social media, taking up the public space hankered to wage popular contention and serious discussion.

First and foremost, as a reason to agitate resistance to the media hegemony, netizens showed acrimony to the rampaging fandom and star-making in the social media age, both of which were seen as superficial (Fig. 4). As two users in Zhihu - focusing on trivial messages of fan fever and star promotion that were deviant from the initial goal of poverty alleviation, and on the long-standing negative impression of data-traffic stars, respectively - grumbled below:

I just wish there are more emphasis on his hometown and less hype about his looks, his horse, and his uncle. What’s the point? It is wasting public resources. How is this different

from those inane stars who can go on trending by dressing and necklace-wearing? I just said I didn't like him, and his fans attacked me. How irrational they were (Zhihu user Oscar-Kpha)!

One of my pet peeves is that the doltish messages about the data-traffic stars take over or bombard my social media... They are deplorable to China. How come they dominate so many information platforms? Anything good they do by dominating information platforms? Look, brainless fan, surrogacy, taking drugs, plagiarizing, terrible films... These "rubbish" stars are weirdos packaged by capitals; I don't understand why the officials promote a pure Tibetan boy by learning this (Zhihu user Willard-Jac).



Fig.4 The Screenshot of Tenzing's Trending Topics on Weibo Posted to Zhihu

To netizens in this thread, furthermore, the intense promotion invested a strong sense of hegemonically manipulating information to shape the public appetite and continually tempt fan fever. As some metaphorically aired repugnance to the inundation of promotional messages and alluded to the media hegemony:

I don't like anyone judging me what should I be concerned about. That's all. It reminds me of an interesting thing when I was a kid. I didn't like to eat sweet dumplings which were too sugary and icky to me, while elders said it was delicious and kept me eating until I felt

vomiting. Since then I have never eaten it (Zhihu user Sarkozy).

The officials once said to regulate the data-traffic stars, but now promote Tenzing, and push his information so frequently... Yes, I dislike him... My lords, you say shit tastes good. Okay, but could you not forcibly feed me shit (Zhihu user MerceIv).

Moreover, the flooding of entertainment information by hyping stunts was interpreted as paralyzing people's minds and obtruding them from rational thinking. For example, Zhihu user Posekinra described the result of "amusing to death" as leading people to be deprived of the beauty of literature, the richness of the imagination, and the depth of criticism. Also, they showed a desire to get rid of being manipulated by the media promotion yet demanded a public space beyond fandom entertainment and disclosing the social reality. As some made their comments below:

Thinking carefully, at the end of the day, we will lose our ability of thinking but entertain to death, if the media technology is kept used in entertainment. We should pursue the valuable culture but not be manipulated by the promotion content (Zhihu user Harasii).

The media buzz depicted a prosperous world, but it is not true. It concealed the social reality behind, namely, left-behind children, stricken poverty, and educational problem, which are highly serious and crucial in the grassroots... In those remote regions, parents stop kids from schooling, pupils drink alcohol, youths extort money in the street... Mainstream opinion has been too flattering to the middle class and has completely ignored the grassroots (Zhihu user Bernas-Hoki).

In particular, contrasted to the frenzied promotion of the young idol, an ongoing contentious event that received widespread attention was gradually quieted down. In social media brimming with Tenzing-related information, hashtags pertinent to the popular contention faded from trending, and netizens' posts and comments under these threads were removed. It raised suspicions that the authority attempted to forge a harmonious image to paper over public sentiment and squelch the contentious incident from escalating. This strategy to influence the public limelight was described as "pushing down trending topics" - constantly manufacturing and promoting the entertainment information and expurgating the contentious information in tandem. It enraged a bunch of netizens as their vociferous sentiment for upholding social justice and pressuring the state was overwhelmed by the entertainment information they saw as frivolous. Some conveyed dismays for the stark contrast:

It's good but without the one, we are concerned about. Let's remember what we should remember, forget what we should forget. Let's celebrate the flourishing age and glitzy world. I'm so proud of it. I'm not being sarcastic, okay? Do not put labels on me! I'm just saying that, while focusing on these beautiful things, let's don't forget that lonely idealist. Never let the one who carried firewood for us finally died in the blizzard (Zhihu user Kassa-Emep).

I do not pay any attention to Tenzing. Except for seeing his photo, I know nothing and do not want to know anything about him. I just want to know why the question [about the contentious event] with 34,000 followers and more than 10,000 answers is No.6 in trending while the one [related to Tenzing] with 1700 followers and more than 400 answers is No.1. If Tenzing is what you want me to see, sorry, I refuse, no matter how good he is (Zhihu user Joseph-kaw).

As a result, netizens' resistance targeted not only fandom entertainment that served as a stability-maintenance tactic but also the media hegemony behind that was perceived as ballyhooing a young idol to temper the popular contention. It demonstrates that while the state involvement in star-making can achieve political objectives, the tension between liberation and authoritarianism embodies through the run-ins between fandom entertainment and serious discussion. In other words, state involvement could be translated as integration into mass entertainment but also invasion into public space to some degree.

6. Discussion

This study that examines 2,000 posts in the biggest Q&A platform (Zhihu) in China, contributes to an understudied area by exploring netizen reactions to the state-promoted star-making of a

Tibetan young idol (Tenzing Tsondu); and provides insights into the state involvement in fandom entertainment entangled with ethnic minority issues that have significant political implications in China. Using thematic analysis, I identified three themes: dissidence by showing compliance, imagining to instrumentalize Tenzing for political uses, and repulsion to fandom entertainment.

In doing so, my analysis in the first theme shows that though the ideological imbue in China functions in generating compliance, it also leads to the path dependency that restricts the state propaganda. My findings show that the discourse poached from the mainstream could be the resource for provoking and holding discordance. In this case, collectivism that frequently appeared in netizens' posts, is the prominent ideology in China inherited from the socialist-revolutionary era that the state employed to frame individual life into a larger national plan (Selden, 2016). In the post-socialist age, the state also sought to maintain compatibility between the market economy and socialist values by proving that "even in a market economy... there were still Chinese who exhibited dedication, self-sacrifice, and diligence" (Chen, 1998, p. 38), making the collectivist discourse still featured in the ideological landscape (Lu, Aldrich & Shi, 2014). However, the "contribution-less" young idol promoted by the Chinese state betrayed the collectivist value that has been ingrained into the consciousness of Chinese people. Netizens, in this regard, thus morally disqualified the propagandist investment for the young idol.

Moreover, netizens lodged complaints by showing how complaint they were to the mainstream ideology of meritocracy and life, and highlighting the inequality of them being unappreciated, in comparison with Tenzing's "effortless" rise. Behind their descriptions were the brewing grievance and collective anxieties for the social stagnation. This finding echoes cultural studies about the Chinese burn-out generation that convey defeatism and dispiritedness to the mainstream (Lu, 2021; Tan & Cheng, 2020). It also indicates the "ticking time bomb" in China as the youth pile-up grievance about the risky employment market and unsatisfied return on educational investment (Schucher, 2014). As unveiled by a rife catchphrase "*tangping*" (lying flat), referring to the "inaction strategy", the millennials in droves demur the overworking and hyper-competitive atmosphere and dim prospects of moving up social ladders (Ji & He, 2021).

In contrast, my analysis in the second theme emphasizing the Tibetan identity portrays a different picture that, in netizens' posts, Tenzing was imaginarily instrumentalized to meet the nationalistic and racist demands. For one thing, my analysis is based on exploring a derogatory term - "white left" (Zhang, 2020). It referred to a popular cyber-culture in China that holds a realistic/pragmatic stance to gibe the Western "liberal elites" active in promoting liberal-democratic norms (e.g., gender/racial equality) that are belittled as elitist ignorance and hypocrisy. My analysis adds to the literature in this thread that recorded the surging right-wing populism in China, as what has been shown in the Trumpian ideology with outright racist, misogynistic, Islamophobic, and anti-refugee rhetoric (Lin, 2021). My findings support the argument that right-wing populism in China is entangled with nationalistic desires (Zhang, 2020) to overturn the liberal-hegemonic world order and increasingly realize China's global leadership (Zhao, 2021). And this article steps further by showing that though holding an anti-elitist stance, Chinese netizens hoped to utilize the liberal elite (i.e., Tenzing, who was supposed to have tags like racial equality and animal welfare) to engage in the liberal-democratic International dialogue, which was expected to retort the Western accusations (e.g., human right of ethnic minority) and using the equivalently normative discourse to condemn the imagined rivals in International frictions. Besides, my findings echo the studies of "Han supremacism" (Leibold, 2010) by showing that netizens also imagined using Tenzing's state-promoted success as an obedient example for other ethnic minority groups, which patriarchal-ly discredited the ethnic minority unrest and shaped them as the "other" within the Chinese context.

My research on the third theme sheds light on the Chinese netizens' reactions to fandom entertainment. In this thread, Yang (2011) contended that "entertainment is often used as scapegoat" and the wholesale rejection to it "masks an elitist and biased conception of the Internet and popular culture" (p. 1045). By that, he insisted that it is groundless to demand the Chinese netizen defuse amusement, and in history, sometimes playful activities were where mass politics started and were waged. My analysis provides insights by elaborating that netizens' repulsion to fandom

entertainment carries a civil spirit to resist the state-capital-collusion media hegemony. It shows that the tension between liberation and authoritarianism in Chinese cyberspace can be embodied in the accusations of fandom entertainment. Considering the demography of Zhihu users as well-educated youth, it is not strange that they harbor “elitist prejudice”, as Yang (2011) suggested, to the fan activities and entertainment information[68-71].

Finally, it is worth pointing out that there are some dimensions this study has not addressed, namely, the gender conflicts reflected in netizen reactions and the relations between Tibetan cultural subjectivity and the commercialization of star-making. How do gender conflicts arise in state-promoted star-making? What are the influences of Tibetan cultural symbols on the aesthetics of urban civilization? How do fan activities in the age of social media affect culturally peripheral-central relations in a multi-ethnic society? I encourage future studies to focus on these questions, which might be helpful to add to the current literature about genders, fan groups, ethnics, and digital culture in China.

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