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Fandom as Method: Decolonising Research on Social Media Communications Through Chinese Transnational Fandoms of a Japanese Olympic Figure Skater

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Abstract

This paper focuses on international sports personality in figure staking Yuzuru Hanyu, who plays for Japan, and his transnational fandoms in China, to examine the politicisation of his evolving fandom during and after his performance at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Our contribution is to illustrate the value of analysing fandoms in the Chinese social media as a method that seeks to advance a decolonised approach to communication studies. This study uses digital ethnography to collect data and conducts critical thematic analysis to illustrate the complexity of socially mediated fandom debates and flames. Consulting interdisciplinary literature in sports fandom and communication, athletic branding, and political communication, we propose a fresh critical approach to Chinese communication studies, which we have conceptualised as "fandom as method." We offer a case study to illustrate this critical approach, which we argue is a contribution to decolonising scholarship by promoting inclusivity of alternative approaches, in

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communication studies in the global south. "Fandom as method" can excavate new terrain, rather than simply adding to West-centric theoretical advances. Findings underscore that critically analysing the complex interplay between fans, anti-fans, and the authorities through "fandom as method" can reveal previously undetected communication patterns. More importantly, fandom as method can help us interrogate the nuances of communications situated within complex, dynamic, evolving patriotic and nationalistic social media discourses. This approach helps to explicate opaque clashes of "mainstremeist belief and action" in the name of patriotism and nationalism which, in the Chinese context, are subject to intervention from the authorities as the ultimate other. It reveals how social media activity politicises a sports personality, a fandom trend that seems likely to spill over into other spheres of the entertainment industry.

Introduction

The Winter Olympics seems peculiar to many Chinese viewers, as it did not feature as part of everyday life or the sports scene until Beijing hosted the games in 2008. Over the years, it has gained in popularity, helped by a government push to promote healthy living and pride in global sporting prowess as well as through intensive marketing by holders of broadcast rights.

It is widely accepted that international sports personalities, while entertaining and educating their audiences through the mass media, play a vital role in engendering national pride and cohesion. Athletes, personalities, and celebrities are regarded as "social sign[s], carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which express the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style" (Gledhill, 1991: xiii).

The case we bring to this special issue demonstrates how this cultural phenomenon whereby the media facilitates the development of celebrities symbolic of personal and national ambitions is also evident in social media fandoms. In other words, it is developed not only in a top-down hierarchical fashion as occurs in the traditional one-to-many mass media, but in the micro-conversations and relational activity between individuals with potentially conflicting agendas in the converged social media ecosystem. The messages are pushed, though not exclusively controlled, by a central diktat, and are organically and paradoxically shaped and negotiated by individuals with conflicting ideologies and agendas who are part of a rising creative class. The individuals who become celebrities in this digital environment, meanwhile, are not stereotypically successful, with fandom arguably lending itself to the creation of anti-heroes and anti-heroines, or a new type of celebrity. National lines are blurred in social media and through celebrities who gain traction in the social media. The case of Hanyu demonstrates how Chinese fans,

or Fanyus (Ho and Lim, 2023: 573), and anti-fans found common ground in a sports figure from another country and embraced him as a cultural symbol. This case excavates dialectical tensions between supporting fans and anti-fans in a specific cultural context, helping us to observe how contradictions are managed in the meaning-making process. As has been highlighted in studies focusing on the complex relational dance with and around opposites in families (Baxter and Scharp, 2015), we see Hanyu's Chinese and Japanese fans and anti-fans negotiating positions and developing understanding through a mutual discourse but with different, and opposing, agendas.

Furthermore, discussions in the social media influence the way the conversation in the mainstream media is shaped and can become a powerful force that gathers a life of its own in the creation of a celebrity. In this instance, young figure-skating personality Yuzuru Hanyu, a two-time Olympics gold medallist with at least 19 world records under his belt at the time of writing, captures the imaginations, hearts, and minds of social media users. Although he is regarded as one of the most talented figure skaters, he failed to successfully defend his title in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and later announced retirement when he returned to Japan. However, his performance was not framed as failure in Chinese and international media, but more as an adorable anti-hero, causing quite a stir – and even flames – in his transnational fandom communities (Ho and Lim, 2023). With pop star status in Japan, Hanyu has also resonated with different communities of interest around the world. His media representations have become the focus of evaluation by critical media, cultural studies and gender studies scholars who contrast treatments of Asian and white-world masculinities (see Ho and Lim, 2023).

This study goes beyond scrutiny of the emblematic, to try to understand how the blurred lines between the physical world and metaverse in fandoms play into symbolic interpretations. Informed by the transcendental empiricism of Deleuze, we trace how rhizomatic narratives around and of Hanyu contribute to, and manifest, as a symptom of rising nationalist sentiments and alt-right movements around the world (Topinka et al., 2021), which paradoxically seem to work as a counter force to the cosmopolitanism that the Olympics sets out to promote and achieve.

To understand the power of fandoms, it is useful to examine the nature of these digital habitats. Nurtured and multiplied exponentially with devoted fannish love and affection, the socially mediated personality's image, orchestrated fan labour and fan arts coexist on Chinese social media. Fans draw on information in the public domain controlled by the mass media while also feeding into it, indirectly through newsgatherers and directly by engaging with content in the converged environment. These interrelated practices have become fan "data work" (Ge and Chen, 2023; Zhang and Negus, 2020), as fans work on public relations pieces, competition analyses and curation posts (Chen, 2022). Fans are natural collectors, as demonstrated in both Western and Chinese fandom activities (Whyke et al., 2023). These fandom posts (texts) and paratexts created around a personality become a rich site and archive for cultural analysis where different powers and forces cooperate and compete (Chen, 2021b).

We collected data from several sources, including news reports from mainstream state-owned and commercial media, as well as fan creations from various social media

platforms. These include comments and discussions in sports fora, re-edits on Bilibili (the most popular video-sharing social media in China, see more in Chen, 2021a, 2021b) and opinion pieces from Zhihu.com (China's most influential Q&A portal, see more in Peng, 2022). Within the data, we examined and compared how Hanyu has been portrayed through different media outlets, both mainstream and socially mediated. We then conducted a thematic analysis highlighting the central themes that manifest the competing narratives from different media outlets and critically analysed the reason why such a difference was constructed in the Chinese context. Therefore, the contribution of this article is twofold. Firstly, we conduct a unique case study of transnational fandom in China as a niche focus of contemporary China studies and political communication. Secondly, we advance case studies conceptualised as "fandom as method" to decolonise Chinese communication studies to shed a different perspective from West-centric studies, which tend to have a disproportionate weighting on censorship and thought orchestration (see recent review in Talmacs and Peng, 2023) even though that strand of research is important and has its own merits (Chen, 2023; Topinka et al., 2021).

The structure of the paper is as follows. We first conduct a review of fandom in China and Chinese political communication in Western literature. We seek to find the correlation between transnational fandom and bilateral relationships in the context of a polarising world. Recent literature on sports fandom in Asia and beyond also confirms such a trend (Ho and Lim, 2023; Peng et al., 2022). Therefore, we here propose "fandom as method" in investigating Chinese international and political communication as we argue that fandomisation of civic engagement is neglected in recent literature. We then explain the methods used, with a central focus on texts that are socially mediated and are a crystallisation of fans' lived experiences and reflective self-narration (Peng et al., 2023). This approach, we argue, offers richer insights than solely relying on mainstream media reports and commentaries.

Conceptual Interventions From the Contextualised Active Fandom Theorem

This literature review serves the twofold aim outlined in the introduction, namely, to prepare for the critical analysis of the transnational fandom case study; and, to advance the framework conceptualised as "fandom as method" in the Chinese and wider global south context, where civic engagement and fandom are treated separately in the literature. In particular, we bring together the foci of a new agency (actorhood) and possibilities for communication and civic engagement in the cultural politics of the everyday. This is to further the conversation with, and debate about, Chinese communication studies in the West, where Chinese communication is often situated within an ideological, culturalist, if not racialised, framing, and where certain investigations and their findings are predetermined based on differences in cultural values or polities (Wang, 2022).

What we try to contribute and achieve is to diversify the focus and approach of Chinese communication studies in the West by examining how cultural analyses of fandom

practice, activity, and expression observed and collected from social media platforms penetrate civic engagement. These include the most popular and influential video-sharing site Bilibili, China's YouTube equivalent, as well as Zhihu.com, China's largest Q&A site. These fandom spaces are readily available for public opinion to be formed and debated, which is largely neglected by research that focuses more on news reporting in traditional and elite media outlets. Our "fandom as method" conceptualisation, while influenced by Deleuzian empiricism, draws inspiration from the following Asian scholars: The seminal works of Kuan-Hsing Chen, who aims to de-imperialise social sciences and cultural studies through a more inclusive and contextualised approach to knowledge production, coining the term "Asia as method" (2010); and Chinese social anthropologist Xiang Biao, who conceptualised "the self as method" (Xiang and Wu, 2023). Also gaining traction in academia, and helping to contextualise "fandom as method," is the new genre of "autosociobiographies" (Rieger-Ladich and Wortmann, 2021) reflected in fandom studies in and beyond Asia (Grant and Love, 2019; Kim, 2021).

We provide additional perspective to the body of scholarship influenced by Xiang's message to Chinese academia, especially early career researchers, to critically evaluate the world around them and form their own lived experiences. It takes a distinctly anti-colonial perspective (see Chen, 2010; Kim, 2021) on a specific fandom community in China. It is argued that to undertake "fandom as method" in China is to emphasise the agency of the fandom experience as both *material* and *expressive* (our emphasis). This study breaks away from an application of Western theorisation on fandom to examine the role of fans in creating communities and constructing their own ideologies. This paper contributes to media and communication studies and fandom studies in China by advocating and proposing "fandom as a method" to understand collective and participatory communities and their agency in post-socialist China.

Our contribution is based on the contextualisation of Chinese media industries and communication practices in the form of fandom. This is of particular importance as Western literature on Chinese communication studies has a disproportionate focus on censorship across state and commercial media outlets (Shao and Wang, 2017; Xu, 2022), while agentic and participatory engagements are less documented and imagined (Guo and Chen, 2022), with some recent exceptions that pay special attention to censorship and surveillance (Cao, 2022; Qin and He, 2022). Filling this research gap, this paper examines the negotiations and resistance within fandom culture by focusing on the agency of audiences, using fandom as a method as it offers a unique gateway to understanding Chinese political communication among citizens.

In addition, contemporary debates on empowerment and exploitation vis-à-vis digital platforms in China still reflect the "othering" perspective from the West and are based on a static view of the agency–structure relationship where the "structure" is presumed to be superimposing and controlling. That is, China is largely examined from the perspective of an "other" to the West. This study, on the other hand, aims to contribute to scholarship that provides a counter-example to West-centric studies that assume "thought orchestration" is a defining feature of Chinese media regulation and civic participation (Talmacs and Peng, 2023).

Therefore, the conceptualisation of "fandom as method" is one of the many attempts to decolonise academic perspectives on the cultural and lived experience of fans in China, and beyond, to emphasise what affective fandom can achieve in resisting thought orchestration and control, which is predominately analysed along the line of rationality (Garg, 2022). By "affective," we mean and adopt the much-accepted understanding of the affective approach in film studies (Moss-Wellington, 2021) and discourse analysis (Peng, 2021). Knudsen and Stage (2015: 4) point to a "social-relational and situated understanding of affect and emotion and their foundational – both constructive and disruptive – involvement in the social fabric of contemporary societies." Our understanding focuses more on the connection between emotion and empathy (see discussion on the "affective turn", Moss-Wellington 2021: 19–20) rather than inorganically organised affect. Deleuze (1988) defines affect as the "outcome of the encounter between entities," and Ash (2015: 84) further explains that these entities are in turn "affected by these encounters" (see review in Peng, 2021). Such an understanding is an active and ethical choice, as put by Moss-Wellington (2021: 5), "reconfiguring past philosophic preoccupations with truth and belief to render them more specific about the ways in which belief contributes to action, and actions affect others—and then to suggest new courses of action."

In other words, we are more interested in what fans and fandom can become and do as "a becoming actorhood" (Gehman et al., 2022), rather than defining what fandom is from a static, and purely epistemological, perspective. Such a conceptualisation therefore requires our investigation to be primarily concerned with the agency of fans (human) and fandom (non-human) so as to examine such agency within the assemblage of the cultural production, the state, and the platform where fandom is intertwined, co-created and co-shaped. This also informs our methodology, which examines both the top-down structural level power dynamics and the bottom-up fandom experience and practices.

Fandom Studies in a Transnational and Sports Setting

Fandom and (new) media use research has proliferated and accelerated in tandem with the evolution of technologies since the turn of the twenty-first century. Identified as manifesting "the dialectic of values" (Hills, 2002), fandom studies have negotiated and established a position in Western academia and universities, critically and successfully detached from the "fanatic" etymological association. The binary oppositional view on fandom and its effects in developed Western societies, where neoliberal market economies prevail (Shim and Shin, 2016), have developed to a stage where media fans are deemed "perfect consumers," and therefore criticism over the "active fan" theory against Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (2006) persists (see review in Gibson, 2000; Morley, 1993).

Fandom as… and…

In order to go beyond the binary oppositional conceptualisation where fans are either empowered or exploited, we conceptualise fandom through a synthesis of Deleuzian

and Chinese associative philosophical perspectives, where fandom works when its agency is activated through encounters with other agents within an assemblage. In other words, fandom can be conceptualised as a becoming actorhood that follows a soft structure uniting empowerment-constraint dialectics, as a *whole* and *totality* (our emphasis). The reason that there is a soft structure is because the agent in each structure (a particular fandom) can change over time and there are scenarios where the agents are in-betweens, in an either-or or both-and situation. Conceptually, it is tempting to single out fandom as a concept and explain the relationship it has with other human and non-human agents within a given structure. However, we take a Deleuzian approach which is inspired by Chinese associative philosophy in understanding fandom as an assemblage and interpreted by up-to-date literature in organisational studies (Gehman et al., 2022).

Within recent fandom studies in China, especially sports fandom, such contextualised approaches are more and more applied in situating and contextualising Chinese fandoms within specific social milieux (Gong, 2020; Guo and Xu, 2023; Sun, 2023). Most research papers tend to have a separate section for contextualisation, to "fit in" a structured narrative in Western academia published in English. While we appreciate the efforts in engaging with this historical and contextualised approach, we also worry about it becoming a normalised and normalising force in and for Western academia. We propose to integrate the use of "fandom as method" to foster an understanding of the social realities of Chinese and Asian societies. Therefore, we focus our literature review more on re-conceptualisation of Chinese fandom vis-a-vis civic engagement to replace conventional contextualisation of censorship, as we share the belief that necessary re-conceptualisation better serves the purpose of indigenous and local studies outside the experiences and insights generated from Western empirical studies.

The paradoxical nature of censorship, in that censorship, self-censorship, and resisting censorship contribute consciously and subconsciously to meaning-making, is widely acknowledged. However, there appears to be a preoccupation with censorship across the breadth of Chinese communications studies, and our proposed re-conceptualisation enables us to explore meaning-making beyond the confines of what appears to be at times a stuck record track of China-bashing for its own sake in West-centric scholarship. Analysis from our proposed perspective allows us to acknowledge and explore in a deep, rich way the subtle hues of control that netizens exhibit over their own actions and outcomes. Furthermore, this ontological stance does not ignore censorship; it allows us to examine how fans and anti-fans use their considerable agency in the vast, complex, and evolving digital world they inhabit to provide fresh interpretations of communications activity. Fan agency is multi-faceted, acknowledging inter alia that: fans are active, not passive; they interact and contribute to digital artefacts such as texts; they negotiate identities, relationships, and meaning within and outside online communities; and can influence others in the physical and digital worlds informed by the associative philosophy we reviewed above.

Gong (2020), who argued along the same line of an active fandom theorem, demonstrated the importance of situating examinations of active meaning-making efforts in a case study of Chinese European football fans whose self-reflective fannish engagements

were limited by "their local urban experience." Gong found that their reflections were underpinned by discourses of competitive individualism and utilitarian commercialism as part of the rising ideology during China's neoliberal reform (Gong, 2020: 442). Similarly, when contemplating the relationship between sports fandom and nationalist media coverage in China's first Winter Olympics, Guo and Xu (2023) focus on the top-down organisational portrayal of home athletes in addition to *organised gatherings* (our emphasis) and fandoms and socially mediated communications.

Ironically, cultural studies literature seldom engages fandom and its associated communities through the lens of organisational studies. There is an urgent need to acknowledge such an approach as fandom in East Asia is becoming ever-organised, colliding with individual-led and unorganised fandom. There is a conceptual and empirical conundrum where the individually and socially organised fandoms are singled out for cultural analysis. Therefore, this paper also bridges such a literature gap by consulting multidisciplinary literature in media and cultural studies, sociology, and organisational studies. With this in mind, fandom is further articulated through "as" or "and," in addition to "be." Here, our approach differs from previous attempts as it creates an onto-epistemological dialectic (Garud et al., 2007). In doing so, the actorhood of fandom is further examined on its possibility of being a method, to achieve and do things in the sphere of civic engagement (an activator of a given assemblage in Deleuze's term). Our approach, informed by process and "becoming" philosophy, works well with the transformational role of politics. As pointed out by Cha (2008: 2–3), "sport matters in both domestic and international politics because it can create diplomatic breakthroughs (or breakdowns) in ways unanticipated by regular diplomacy"; it "is an unmistakable prism through which nation-states project their image to the world, and to their own people," and "can be a facilitator of change within a country."

Deleuzian Theorisation of Actorhood

One major contribution of this paper is to use multi-disciplinary literature to revisit fandom in China to create situated knowledge, analyse, and more importantly, imagine fandom's agency in fostering progressive social change. We first explain how the concept of assemblage as a new onto-epistemological dialectic helps understand the "becoming" nature of agents and actorhood (Deleuze, 1988). According to Gehman et al. (2022), within organisational studies, there is an onto-epistemological shortcoming identified by generations of scholars investigating the agency of different actors in tackling a socially or culturally embedded problem. This is manifested through the difficulty where actors, human and non-human (institutions included), are epistemologically undistinguished or indistinguishable. Many scholars insist on viewing "actors as intentional, rational, coherent, autonomous, and sovereign entities" (Gehman et al., 2022: 2). Such an actor-centric approach may develop an interpretation of entrepreneurship and organisation management primarily based on individual actors such as entrepreneurs (advanced by the Austrian school). Others who take a more process-centric approach tend to investigate why institutions matter (see review in Chen, 2021a). Such dualism can also be

found in other dialectical pairs regarded as a priori premise, such as realist versus phenomenological; centralised versus distributed; intentional versus emergent; actor-centric versus process-centric; or economic versus sociological accounts in organisational studies (Gehman et al., 2022: 2).

The dualist and binary oppositional way of structuring and understanding the world loses its power when an issue is co-shaped by "multiplicity," or a united whole as described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). This assemblage is an action of matching and fitting together a series of components in an associative way (agencer) and is to be understood as "processes of assembling agency" (Gehman et al., 2022). Here, this theorisation specifically contributes to fandom studies literature where fans' agency and expressions (online presentation and representation) are conceptualised as separate, while fans' agency and their writings and mobilisation are one and the same from an activist lens, as they write themselves into being (Chen, 2020) while affectively impacting their audiences, targeted or not. The latter is a common approach taken in studies of cultural politics, where media texts are collected and analysed as "reflecting" a certain hidden ideology. Here, our proposed approach is to unite these two strands of analyses, since assemblage is both expressive and material (Wise, 2011). In addition, the central focus of assemblage theory is the power dynamics that are changing and becoming as opposed to being static (Chen, 2020).

Our conceptualisation therefore offers an important alternative in the Chinese context to the thought orchestration paradigm that dominates Western literature. This is especially the case where control around fandom has intensified in terms of fandom organisation and mobilisation in recent years (Sun, 2023). Here, we have no intention to celebrate fandom's progressive potential in the Chinese context, but to stress the neglected aspect of fandom agency as a becoming actorhood. At the practical level, fandom as method aims to provide an alternative lens to the dominant perspective that reflects realities in the West where democracy is cynically disengaged (even from the left), while fandom or digital ethnography in general is disregarded or not treated seriously (Abidin, 2018). In West-centric literature, fans' agency and subcultural style expressions are regarded as resistance precisely because they are constructed and reified within established power structures, which describes the reaction of one force exhibiting different values in front of the dominant force (Barker, 2008: 437).

"Fandom as method" thus aims to create ruptures, organisations, and practices, either arborescently or rhizomatically; in other words, there are two types of assembling actorhood where the tree-like mode and the rhizome-like mode, where the in-flux mode of organising, arranging, and living are all embraced (Gehman et al., 2022). This offers a new way to re-think fandom as change-making, not just another human activity and practice to be colonised by tech giants, platforms, and marketers.

Contextualising Chinese Sports Fandom and Methodological Choices

While fans' resistance towards orchestrated thinking in a Chinese context does not dominate our perspective, we nevertheless acknowledge its existence and identify the agents

within various practices of orchestrations and negotiations. We narrow our focus to examine how Chinese fans demonstrate their agency under the much-celebrated sharing platform economy. As noted previously, this paper uses a flagship case, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and its transnational fandom of Japanese figure skating two-time gold medallist Yuzuru Hanyu to examine fans' agency and how their fannish activities incorporate both rational and affective modes of communication and reflect ideological positions from their way of civic engagement.

"Fandom as method" emphasises methods "to do things" or to use fandom studies approaches to examine political communication in the Chinese context. It guides our data collection and is informed by ethnography that is qualitative and textual in nature. We rely on publicly available data which follows a de-identification process to secure and protect fans' anonymity, in line with the university's institutional ethical approval requirements to protect the identity of research participants. The case is a prime example where fans organise and mobilise fans' agencies in the form of curation and production of fanon vis-a-vis canon (Chaney and Liebler, 2007:1). Our primary focus is on fan-created discourses, while we also adopted a "walk-through" approach (Light et al., 2018) to critically assess how such fanon is structured and curated (arranged) to harness the human and non-human agencies.

The reason for analysing fandom around a sports personality involved in the Olympics is that, as one of the largest international sporting events, the Olympics is historically a channel for the construction and portrayal of sports nationalism (Billings, 2008) and is a nexus of nationality, ethnicity/race, and gender discourse (Song, 2018: 25). In a critical and historical review, Song (2018) made a convincing argument of how Japan, Germany, Russia, and the United States used Olympic Games to advance their agendas in domestic and international politics. Some scholars even argue sports nationalism is more evident in Asia than anywhere in the world (Cha, 2008), though Guo and Xu (2023: 771) posit that nationalist coverage is "inevitable" in media coverage of the Olympics. The Japanese skater Hanyu was identified as a sports celebrity for closer scrutiny because his fandom extends across the world and generations, with his moniker Fanyu and a new verb fanyuism to denote his fans' obsessive Belieber-style (Justin Bieber) behaviour underscoring that there is much material potentially available for examination. Hanyu, who has cult-like status in many communities, has already been the focus of scholarship, for example, his representation of a queer masculinity that breaks from the hegemonic masculinity typically projected by Olympic athletes (see Ho and Lim, 2023) yet elevates him into the league of elite, popular celebrity athletes. It therefore will be useful to better understand communications around Hanyu as this can shed light on various cultural studies themes and can contribute to multi-disciplinary knowledge, including on how celebrity identity and its associated ideologies are forged, accepted and contested through social media activity.

Using ethnographic approaches, we collected a series of fan productions, including mediated engagements, comments, and fannish expressions. The first phase of digital ethnography was mostly conducted on Bilibili; we then moved to Zhihu for more textual data collection. We analysed the data to generate important themes, contextualising them in the broader structure where fandom assemblage is taking shape.

Table 1. The Central Dataset Was Collected From Zhihu.com.

Platform	Topic category	Viewership	Comments
Zhihu	Figure skating/men's single	0.4 billion	388,000

Detailed topics and themes

Index	Organised and curated treads	Topical discussion featured	Keywords
Relevant events	Elite interviews (official news and influential social media outlets) that featured Hanyu	8 examples	ISU, Silver medal, fame in China, PyeongChang 2018 Olympic, skills and signature moves, Weibo top charts, Coach Zhao Hongbo interview, 2018 CWW Live, JSF, Japanese media, partisan media, biased reports, misinformation, protection, gatekeeping
Wiki and reputation	Reviews and profiles repurposed from different media outlets	8 examples	Sexuality and sexual orientation, "objective" review, talent and training, comparison Shoma Uno, Evgeni Viktorovich Plushenko, personality and character, status and ranking, future career, income, look and appearance
Extended and focused discussion	Fannish following, engagement, and gossip	5 examples	Scandal and negative reviews, fandom experience, close contact, nationalist sentiments and transnational fandom, Chinese skater Boyang Jin, JSL Vice Chair's policing of Hanyu's fandom
Career	Career and professional development of Hanyu	4 examples	Retirement, Old King, 4lz, 4f, 4a (the quadruple axel), professional analysis, the discourse and anticipation of a new King

Note. ISU=International Skating Union.

The textual data, based on content analysis, is straightforward to obtain as it is publicly available, well-organised and categorised using tags and labels that direct to Hanyu and his fandom (Table 1). These include his competition, media appearances, as well as fan art and fanfic creations. As pointed out by Peng et al. (2023), the importance of theoretical

sampling is to purposefully find data that addresses a specific problem within a particular cultural context. This is the case for our project since we aim to make both theoretical (conceptual) and empirical contributions to the proposed approach of "fandom as method" through a focused case study. We selected social media posts, Bilibili videos, and comments, as well as media reports from official media outlets in China, including *Xinhua News*, *People's Daily*, and *China News* (official, as opposed to social media). In this paper, we focus on one curated discussion thread on Zhihu. This dataset mirrored our sampling theme, where the content creator provided their own reflections and agency, including on the use of both sources of official media reports and fandom reactions about Hanyu.

The alternative we considered was to undertake "surveillance-as-method" (data scraping and mapping) but rejected this as it seemed to be limiting both methodologically and politically on the grounds that it has typically been the method of choice of academics investigating alt-right and extreme online political discussions mediated in Western contexts (Topinka et al., 2021). By definition, "surveillance-as-method" is the "use of computational methods to gather data on far-right activities on digital media platforms, typically to track keywords or phrases or to map network connections" (Topinka et al., 2021: 384). In contrast, our approach takes a small data sample, but provides richer context with a careful de-identification process to protect subjects.

1. As shown in the table below, the topic thread is a social artefact of Zhihu, where fans set up their own threads and open them up to other users for engagement. The organised and curated nature of such fannish activities is integral to the agency demonstrated by fans, which is underrated by scholars who focus more on what texts fans produce. Therefore, the assemblage framework we proposed in this study demonstrates the fact that fannish activities are arrangements within a process, where the activity and organisation are both material and expressive. Even though we focus on a fan-curated column (periodical), it has 0.4 billion viewership and 388,000 comments and is much richer and more extensive than many published research articles focusing on the Western equivalent of X (formerly Twitter). The Bilibili observation and mainstream media features are in fact incorporated in the chosen thread as it is already curated by fans as part of the greater fanon production. The threads in the chosen column are created under Figure skating/Men's Single, where Hanyu is featured among many other figure skaters. It consists of four topic areas on a five-section landing page (itself a curated index) where fans and users navigate and mobilise their engagements, based on their own interests and agenda. These four topic areas are: Hanyu's relevant events, mostly competitions, tournaments, and some key media engagements.

2. Wiki and review, where fans create general information about Hanyu, as a sports personality and celebrity, his identity (sexuality included), and professional comparisons with his contemporaries and beyond.

3. Extended and focused discussion documents, users' fannish following, engagements, and gossip. This turns out to be the most politically divided within his fandom in China.
4. Finally, fans focus on his career, skills, and talents, including reviews of his successes and failures. There is also a critical and reflective review of the popular discourse of figure skating from the general fandom community.

For the thematic analysis, we employ an open coding strategy, reading and re-reading the texts, and comparing our themes among the three authors. The data collection and analysis aim to answer the central research question: How was Hanyu's fandom politicised in his transnational fandom in China during and after the 2022 Winter Olympics? In the next sections, we will present our themes, with engagement and reflections on our proposed framework and existing research.

The Politicisation of Yuzuru Hanyu

As indicated in our position and proposed framework, we advocate "fandom as method" to understand mediated everyday politics in transnational fandoms, using a case study of a world-leading figure skater navigating professionally, "especially for Asian athletes in a historically white-dominated sport" (Ho and Lim, 2023). As a cultural symbol, sports personalities are sources of cohesion but also division, given they are subject to agentic reappropriations by institutions, organisations, media, and platforms and their varying fandoms are "becoming" assemblages, as established in our literature review and re-conceptualisation.

Existing research about Hanyu notably taps into a range of media, communications, and cultural themes from a West-centric perspective. Hanyu's conspicuous divergence from the norm in the way he presents himself together with his resonance with a wide audience is a source of both fascination and scrutiny. For example, Ho and Lim (2023: 561) examine media representations of Nathan Chen and Hanyu as rivals, relying on Western media reports, especially the *New York Times*. The central focus has been on changing Asian masculinities, where "English-language media reinforce (U.S.) nationalism by portraying 'Quad King' Chen as hypermasculine for his athleticism and 'Ice Prince' Hanyu as feminised for his exceptional artistry." In a similar vein, Lim and Ho (2023) try to understand Hanyu's role in establishing an emerging Asian masculinity, while Ikuta (2021) looks at whether Hanyu's use of female speaking style reflects gender fluidity. Hanyu also features as a subject for study as an influencer of religious tourism at Japan's shrines (Tillonen, 2020).

Before we move on to present the themes identified in our dataset, we must acknowledge there are more than just flames and frictions within fandoms. Fandom also brings people and cultures together, as is examined by Chao (2019), who focuses on the suggested (or imagined) "competitive and idol–fan relationship" between Hanyu and Russian world champion Plushenko (Chao, 2019). Social media has facilitated the proliferation of queer fan discourses in China, where sexuality other than heterosexual has been subject to a government policy of "no encouraging, no discouraging and no

promoting" (Lavin et al., 2017: xvi). Fanyus have made their mark in Asian queer communities, though they have not especially been singled out for closer examination until now. This is no doubt because the ice-skater is relatively young and therefore only recently came into fame while others such as K-pop band members, who have been the focus of scholarship, were the centre of attention as fandoms developed and evolved and there was concomitant interest from scholars in online communities (Sauro, 2017).

Hanyu's appeal as an international sports personality with transnational fandoms sees him featuring in debates across contemporary social issues, including those with commercial, gendered, racial, and national significance. As Arai et al. (2014) note: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle are all key dimensions that contribute to personal branding and off-field marketable attributes. As for fandom organisations, even within the same group, there is a loyalty test among individual fans for their different identification processes to gain group acceptance (Chen, 2022; Wang, 2021). In the following sections, we present our thematic findings based on data collected and explain how they could reflect the becoming assemblage of "fandom as method."

Nationalist Sentiments in Transnational Fandoms

Looking at the dataset we collected, Hanyu's role as Japan's representative often stirs nationalist sentiments among Chinese fans – even though he is also widely supported abroad by his fans. This has to do with the historical conflicts and rivalry between China and Japan (Zhang, 2020). Similar to other Japanese celebrities who effectively serve as cultural ambassadors, Hanyu is often also subject to scrutiny by anti-fans. In one highly debated topic within a thread (with 1,023,785 views) in our chosen fan-curated column, an anonymous user (default as "Zhihu user") asked why Hanyu was chosen for heavy promotion on both official news and social media in China during the Beijing Winter Olympics. There are 189 answers, and the reasons can be summarised in the following themes:

1. A perfect fit for publicity and soft power imperatives. Chinese state media has been establishing soft power by engaging with world-leading athletes with a "clean and well-rounded image," and importantly are "apolitical." Hanyu is not known to have any political associations. This contention is echoed and supported by existing research, which has marked him as "smart" and always "appreciative (Grateful and Complimentary)" towards people who support him, and he takes a non-discriminatory and inclusive approach (Li et al., 2022). This has distinguished him from other Olympic medallists who adopt different statement strategies that align them with identities and even duties, such as patriotism, protest, self-promotion, expert, and role model, or some or all of these.
2. Evidence-based fact-checking of apolitical status. Fans provide "their evidence" of praise and support from official Chinese diplomatic bodies and individuals, as well as Chinese state media, in the form of social media posts, such as from X (which cannot be accessed on China's mainland) and Weibo. These include
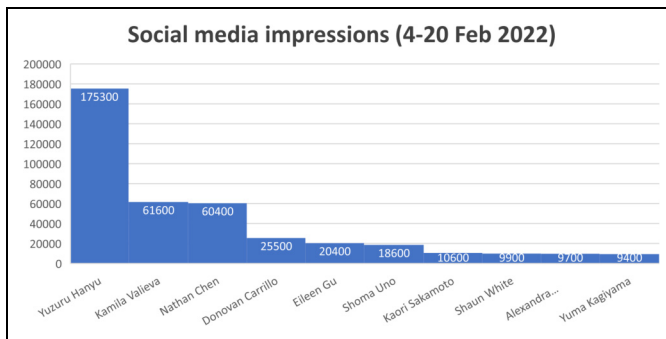
Figure 1. Adopted from SPUTNIK Weibo Handle based on data collected from 4–20 Feb 2022.

social media reports, *CCTV News* (10 reports), *The People's Daily* (6), *Cankao Xiaoxi/Reference News* (9), *Global Times* (9), and *CCTV* through its multiple channels (*CCTV 2/4/5/13*) expanding their reports from a pure focus on the event and competition to his sports personality and private life. Chinese spokeswoman Hua Chunying for the Chinese Embassy to Japan, Osaka Consulate, among other official X handles, also supported him and wished him luck for his competition in Beijing. There are numerous Kaoju-pai (evidence-based fandoms) in this same thread, with one referencing the media monitoring data from 10 to 20 April. *Sputnik*, a Russian state news agency, reported on their Weibo handle (see Figure 1) that Hanyu was the most reported sports personality in English-speaking media outlets during the Olympics.

3. Affective support and fannish expressions (often one-sided communication) on desirability and capacity for commercialisation. Other themes, as diverse as Lizhi Banyang (lit. inspirational role model), respectful to others outside of the arena, handsome and slender figure, craftsmanship, values, and aesthetics of performance, are also affectively expressed. In other words, they do not seek rational appeal or debates. Instead, fans express their love in blunt ways without seeking further engagement. These desirable traits echoed existing research in celebrity and branding studies (Arai et al., 2014).

These one-sided expressions spark controversy from anti-fans. In one thread that aims to show how supportive fans can be, fans list their spending on Hanyu paraphernalia (merchandise) and activities associated with watching him in action. These expenses include tournament tickets, transportation and accommodation, and merchandise purchased from official and fan-made channels to name but a few. This was leveraged by anti-fans and used against dedicated fans, who were labelled as "just fanatics" and suppliers of selling things people don't need in the first place. Here, competing narratives can arguably be mapped onto the Western equivalent of alt-right groups (de Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020). However, most anti-fans use anonymous accounts which cannot be

easily traced and followed up during such debates – a situation referred to as mask culture in subcultural groups. This leads to a unique finding in transnational fandoms in the Chinese context to be explained below.

4. Nationalist sentiments and patriotism are used by both sides, fans and anti-fans alike. We find that when fans justify why Hanyu is "the chosen one" by Chinese state-owned media and the said governmental bodies, they enlist him as one of China's old friends (or old friend-to-be), who can boost China's global image through the Olympics. Their justification is arbitrary yet presented as "undebatable." As @userc001 said: "Look the central government and embassies and Sister Hua (Hua Chunying) are endorsing him; there must be something right about him, not to mention how inspirational he is as an athlete." By contrast, the anti-fans also gather evidence and present their version of fact-checking, revolving around and arguing along the line that Hanyu is patriotic to his home country and even nationalistic, reflecting historic Japan–China tensions.

For example, anti-fans associate Hanyu with far-right political affiliations in Japanese politics, using screenshots of Hanyu receiving The People's Honour Award, dubbed as "national glory" for his sports excellence (JapanForward, 2018). The example aims to create a directed interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, of Hanyu's gesture where he half-jokingly tried to put the medal on the neck of the late Shinzo Abe, the then Prime Minister of Japan and President of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2018 (can be found via a simple online search). In addition, regarding Abe and his engagement with figure skaters, fans recall that back then the national team of Japan greeted the Prime Minister with hugs. Furthermore, a video about this was docked to plot another conspiracy that Hanyu pressured female athletes to hug the Prime Minister during the same meet-and-greet event.

These posts are constructed alongside the fan-curated Column we gathered (Table 1) with 391,282 pageviews. In it, fans express their view that there is "no need to respond as it is ridiculous" (see Figure 2, where numerous respondents replied with a popular meme). Fans were also sympathetic to the long-established male-favouring gender hierarchy in Japan and pointed out anti-fans were using "a forced woke strategy," which is "a low shot" (@userc011 @userc120). User @userc122 distinguished sports personalities from little-fresh-meat idols (Chen, 2022) and specifically used a controversial idol duo, Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo, whose fandom flames caused the ban of one of the world's largest fandom online fora, AO3, Archives of Our Own (Wang, 2021).

Here the arguments have two theses. First, since anti-fans established the so-called fact that Hanyu is a national hero in Japan and has alleged alt-right affiliations, he does not deserve Chinese fans' affection and support, and should therefore be banned. This directly opposes the "apolitical" argument from the supporting side of his fandom. Second, there is a hidden hierarchy within the in-group fandom community (as opposed to anti-fans) between "sports fans" and "look/idol fans." Here, sports fans claim themselves as "real

fans" since they focus on sporting spirits and techniques, while look-fans (Yanfen/颜粉) who claimed to be "real fans" of Hanyu, primarily support him not as a sports personality or athlete but an idol. These look-fans are discriminated against because they are deemed to be only seeking libido satisfaction and are after "the looks" of idols. Such sports fans go on to advance their argument based on anecdotal evidence that the look-fans later directed their affections and support to Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo arguably for their good looks and bromance during Hanyu's alleged, or manufactured, far-right connection scandal.

5. Mis-, disinformation from conspirators, or fannish fiction? The themes discussed in the previous section identified two extremes of the polarised fandom spectrum. However, despite their polarised attitudes, fans activate their own agencies to mobilise and create their narratives to advance their agendas. Misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories are keywords repeatedly being used in fans' posts and rebuttals, labelling their counterparts as such to discredit their "stories" and "fictions." As we demonstrated in the data gathered and, in the themes, critically analysed, the language games utilise and contextualise different power structures when advancing their respective agendas. While state news agencies might add fuel to the debate, they are not instrumental in developing these, with ideological arguments developing organically from fan and anti-fan groups.
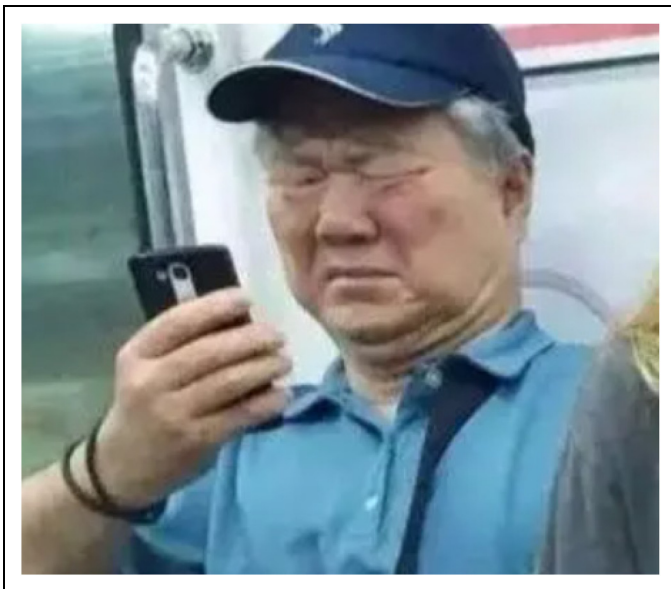
Figure 2. Popular Online Memes to Express Shock.

Figure 3. Founding Fathers of the International Skating Union (ISU).

Occasionally, actors from across Hanyu's fandom divides join forces. As an example, we see a ceasefire between fans and anti-fans within Asia forging a united front against the International Skating Union (ISU). Fans took the founding fathers' photograph (labelled as old white men, see Figure 3, @xuanjie) from ISU's About page to demonstrate how the sport was "white dominated" until relatively recently. The First Asia Congress on skating was hosted in Asia until 2002, which means it took more than 100 years for the ISU to take this step (ISU, 2023). This critical reflection within fandoms has been further strengthened by other fans who have written about the corruption in the organisation and events over the years and how Asian athletes have been unfairly treated as outsiders.

Discussions on "Fandom as Method"

So far, we have offered detailed and critical analyses of competing fandom narratives that contribute to the politicisation of Hanyu's transnational fandoms. In particular, how they advance their agenda by creating their narratives and, sometimes, fictions. What does this tell us in terms of the polarised world we are living in, two decades into the twenty-first century? How can our "fandom as method" approach contribute to the field of political

communications and social media communications in non-Western contexts? We have witnessed Trump's successful election and disruptive social media mobilisation of populism and alt-right movements while accusing mass media of propagating "fake news." Across Europe, the far right has been gaining ground across nations (Henley, 2023). We posit that as the right-wing gains traction in the Western world, so too is it building support in Asia, looking at fandom debates. The "fandom as method" approach helps us identify cultural trends and find progressive solutions. It is a useful approach to help us understand grassroots politics, and this in turn helps us contribute to understanding domestic and international politics. Fandom as method is an approach that allows us to examine ideological development beyond the mainstream and official discourses.

Adopting a walk-through strategy (Light et al., 2018), we have gathered the threads and topics about Hanyu's competing fandoms. On Zhihu, the analysis excavated an arborescent assemblage, where the centrality is Yuzuru Hanyu and every other aspect that revolves around him, his identity, career, competitions, and media appearances. This arborescent assemblage is structured with a logical and rational view of the socially mediated subject. At the same time, we also see rhizomatic assemblage, where the other narratives, debates, flames, supportive or otherwise are not always based on rational debates but through affective associations. The case of Hanyu and the politicisation of his sports personality have demonstrated that the two modes of assemblage also work in flux, where the impact on persuasion and agenda-setting cannot be neatly separated. While there appears to be a concerted effort to push a political ideology, the discussions within fandoms are more about protesting the status quo than shaping a vision for the future.

A similar idea is espoused in the "self as method" approach conceptualised by French theorist Eribon. In his self-analysis work *Returning to Reims*, Eribon (2013: 52–53) offered his unique insights into how a working class and communist-supporting family ended up voting for the National Front and engaged in far-right politics:

> To be a communist had next to nothing to do with a desire to establish a government resembling the one found in the USSR … In working-class environments, leftist politics meant first and foremost a very pragmatic rejection of the experience of one's own daily life. It was a form of protest and not a political project inspired by a global perspective.

Therefore, the seemingly absurdity of "such a shameful vote," "had nonetheless been carefully thought over and decided upon" (Eribon, 2013: 130). Similar to the "self as method" approach, "fandom as method" as demonstrated in our case offers contextualised interpretations, not as a way of justification, but as a way of making sense of "the nonsensical," where affects played a significant role.

In the "fandom as method" case, we identify and critically analyse the arrangement of narratives (as in a process, not merely an end product), which is not what the fans necessarily believe or would like to advance as a political project, but a limited agency to resist, sometimes just for resistance's sake. Our approach aims not to unveil secrets that are not known to the public, but to contextualise the group dynamics, their values, beliefs, and affects that are neglected, the neglected mainstream, which consists of a spectrum of

political agendas. Within these assemblages and arrangements, there are established and "becoming" hierarchies that are maintained, disrupted, and even eliminated. Most cases we highlighted are ruptures and activation points (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), for example, the shifting and "becoming" boundaries of in-group and out-group identities, such as "Chinese, Japanese, Asian," which are separated most of the time when discussing the Hanyu fandoms but united when criticising ISU and Olympics events for being dominated by individuals from and representative of developed Western nations.

Therefore, our approach adds contextualised texture to the study of vernacular cultures and sometimes digital extremes. As urged by Topinka et al. (2021: 384), researchers should take "greater caution and reflexivity in reproducing surveillant methods," and pay "greater attention to the historical, ideological context of far-right politics." There are two reasons, as outlined by Topinka et al. (2021). Firstly, surveillance-as-method holds an assumption that once identified, the communication mode and pattern of digital extremism, or "mainstremeist belief and action" (Lux and Jordan, 2019), can be eliminated, or they will wither as they don't make any sense. However, digital extremist groups welcome such "exposure," because they can use what becomes seen as caricatures and mock them "as part of a wider ideological assault on universities, mainstream media, and liberalism" (Topinka et al., 2021: 384). Secondly, "surveillance-as-method reinforces a tactic commonly used by right-wing extremists, who claim to be 'keeping an eye on' liberals, the left, and their purported co-conspirators in the mainstream media, exposing them as biased ideologues driven by an agenda." This is partially identified in our "fandom as method" case, where "mainstremeist belief and action" on patriotism and nationalism in the Chinese context were used by both fans and anti-fans to push their opposing motives. Agency is by default embedded in these processes, with varying degrees of engagement and limitations. Therefore, we argue that the epistemology of becoming an assemblage would be a better approach and tool to capture the zeitgeist where the outcomes of these politicised fandom movements and mobilisations are likely to have very unpredictable outcomes in future.

Conclusion

Advocating "fandom as method," this paper has presented multiple agentic aspects of Hanyu's transnational fandoms. Fandom as method marks the possibilities of fandom as a becoming actorhood, manifested through various media consumption and prosumption practices on social media and these are assembled arborescently, rhizomatically or in flux. We examined multiple agents, ranging from the founder (the management and editorial team) and organisers of different fandom groups to its prosumers, including aspirational amateur content creators, state-run organisations, commercial entities, and brands.

The findings of our study demonstrate that "fandom as method" is a productive approach to critically analyse the "mainstreamist belief and action" in the name of patriotism and nationalism in the Chinese context, a necessary addition to the analyses of Western counterparts. Subject to the expected intervention from the authorities as the ultimate other, fandoms are paradoxically being used by both fans and anti-fans for

competing and even antithetical motives, highlighting the active and agentic aspects of fandoms. Our findings also suggest the manipulation of idols' images and identities creates "fact and truth" for the fannish creative class who are tech-savvy and culturally aware. Social media fan activity leads to the politicisation of transnational sports personalities, which in turn influences the role of these celebrities in other spheres of the entertainment industry. This is a much-neglected aspect of civic engagement in Chinese communication studies in the West where China is often depicted as a monolithic regime where there is no place for agency.

The analyses of this case span multiple social media and news platforms, crystallised via curated fanon – as demonstrated in the threads co-produced by fans on Zhihu.com. The hybrid fanon develops around a sports personality, in this case, Hanyu, with his fandom spaces and communities covering rich genres and multiple, yet contradictory, agencies with "becoming" influences. The walk-through analysis of the platform demonstrates how Zhihu adopted a structured and modular content organisation and promotion design, turning the site from a grassroots free-sharing knowledge community into a commercialised super app. This makes it exhibit the characteristics of an arborescent assembling structure (tree-like model) where hierarchical and homogeneous elements' agency are activated, organised and orchestrated via their data-led architectural design. This has not been an uncommon feature of the Chinese emerging economy during the past 40 years of opening up and reform, with economic planning and experiments tested first before rolling out to a larger scale (Zhao, 2019). In this era, ideas – such as the ideological development of Hanyu as a cultural symbol for a youth that needs to be controlled and acquiesced in the quasi-capitalist nation of China – are frequently tested through social media fandoms.

We acknowledge the limitation of this study that it has a primary focus on one transnational fandom case study with a twofold aim: to advance a critical analytical approach, which is fandom as method; and an empirical contribution to the multi-faceted transnational fandom in and of itself. With cognisance of the limited space and fans' own community policing, gender and sexuality-related debates were excluded from our discussions (see relevant discussions in Ho and Lim, 2023). This calls for similar research to consider "fandom as method" as an emerging force and actor-hood for decolonising Western research on creative expression and resistance at the intersection between global entertainment industries and political communications in Asia.

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