

Fangirls' Defend China From Hong Kong Protesters and the World  
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By Zheping Huang

(Bloomberg) -- For Li Mo, the footage of black-clad people clashing with police and vandalizing storefronts proved the final straw. The images of Hong Kong protesters fighting for greater autonomy from Beijing incensed the mainland-born postgraduate student and she could no longer remain on the sidelines. So, she joined China's fangirl army.

Ever since anti-government demonstrations in Hong Kong turned violent this summer, China's celebrity-obsessed young generation have patrolled Facebook, Twitter and Weibo, ready to pounce on perceived slights and defend their motherland.

Nicknamed "fangirls" because they exhibit the same fervor most often reserved for pop-culture icons, these women and men flood social media with slogans and memes shaming brands -- sometimes with far-reaching consequences.

Fangirls called out Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey for supporting Hong Kong protesters, prompting China's state broadcaster to drop National Basketball Association games. They triggered boycotts of brands from Coach to Apple. Many got swept up by Facebook and Twitter account takedowns. And in a recent incident, the onslaught of vitriol they directed at Hong Kong pop-star Joey Yung forced her to apologize for a single Facebook selfie, but not before she got canned from a high-profile gala.

The Hong Kong unrest spurred Li into action. She quickly picked up typical fangirl behavior -- endlessly liking and reposting trending anti-protest diatribes on Weibo for example -- encouraged that hundreds of thousands shared her values. "I couldn't remain silent any longer," the 28-year-old said. "I don't idolize anyone, I only idolize China."

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While many Westerners, particularly Americans, see China's citizens as forced into supporting Beijing or muzzled from expressing their true feelings, fangirls suggest more earnest and resilient backing for their country's government. They show how large pockets of China's youth are rising up to defend their country against what they perceive as mistreatment and misrepresentation by outsiders, and they underscore a growing sentiment that's shaping how China interacts with the world. China's government has increasingly taken its propaganda efforts overseas, but fangirls' deep convictions set them apart -- and perhaps make them more potent -- from often wooden, state-sponsored online commentators. Known as wumao, or the "50-

cent army,” those bloggers are named after the amount they are said to make from each patriotic posting.

The emergence of fangirls comes at a time Beijing is trying to engage younger Chinese by using rap music, cartoons and chat-app stickers to deliver Communist Party ideology. Homegrown corporations like Tencent Holdings Ltd. often aid such efforts.

A system of education that often stresses the humiliation China suffered at the hands of foreigners also prepared the ground for their rise.

They’re also the latest online patriots to hop the Great Firewall dividing the internet in mainland China from the rest of the world -- with a decidedly millennial twist. They call their nation “Brother Ah Zhong” (Brother China), describing it as a pop idol who debuted 5,000 years ago and now boasts a fan base of 1.4 billion.

甜柚浅歌@YdPQsO8coLINOPO

阿中哥哥14亿粉丝·出道五千年·顶级流量名副其实的C位，某些“xjr”糊的一批就不要过来蹭热度了·我们阿中是这颗球上最靓的仔·不服就battle，守护全世界最好的阿中哥哥！ <https://t.co/fBUMAedrmK>

Sent via Twitter Web App.

View original tweet.

Fang Kecheng, assistant professor of communication and journalism at the Chinese University of Hong Kong sees state influence working hand-in-hand with young nationalist netizens, including fangirls who take note of the narrative on state media, then act upon it. “That’s not to say they are entirely manipulated, or being passively used as a tool,” he says. “There are things they’re searching for, such as a common identity and the ability to express their opinions.”

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Jack Zhou, a 20-year-old hair stylist in central China, is one of a score of volunteer leaders of a 20,000-strong fangirl community. People like him help focus and channel raw emotions that often threaten to spill out of control. In between haircuts, he monitors a chat group of 400 users on messaging app QQ. Participants are charged with spawning content for the group’s main Weibo account. One of their latest productions is a three-minute video showcasing protester violence in Hong Kong, from setting a man on fire to ganging up on a police officer and trying to snatch his pistol. They called on those who can access sites like Facebook and YouTube to share the clip, which has English captions. “Let the world know the truth,” is their slogan.

Zhou’s group has participated in several major online crusades to defend Beijing’s line on Hong Kong over the past

three months, he said. They spammed Instagram accounts of pro-Beijing celebrities with emojis of the Chinese flag, infiltrated Facebook live streams to clash with pro-democracy sympathizers, and plastered Communist Party slogans on the sites of news outlets from CNN to the Washington Post. Their hard work paid off when the Communist Party's Youth League and state media came out in praise of the campaigns, he said.

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Their motivations are widely misunderstood, said Zak Dychtwald, author of *Young China: How the Restless Generation Will Change Their Country and the World*. English-language media writing off Chinese pride as a product of propaganda and brainwashing only fans the flames of nationalism, he said.

"There's ardent pride in the country and fangirls want to defend it," he added. "The energy and sentiment driving the movement in China is genuine."

Zhang Dong, 30, emigrated to Laos in 2013 to work as a tour guide after he graduated from college in China. Only then did he understand how the world depicts his country in such a "horrible" manner. Every day, he churns out dozens of posts on the accounts he registered for the purpose of discrediting Hong Kong's protesters. He's called them "cockroaches," "traitors," and "HKIS," juxtaposing images of them with Islamic State terrorists. There's "essentially no difference" between the two groups, he said.

Zhang is proud of his independence. "I've never received any money from the Communist Party," said Zhang. "If we were wumao, the Chinese government would have owed us hundreds of millions yuan by now."

Fangirls represent another front in social media giants' efforts to curb disinformation campaigns. In August, Twitter suspended nearly 1,000 accounts originating from China, which the company identified as part of a state-backed operation to undermine Hong Kong's protests. Facebook and Google took similar action. That take down didn't have a lasting effect as new accounts emerged to replace those that were removed, a study from social media research firm Astroscreen shows.

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Fangirls like Trista Wang say they have been unfairly targeted by these platforms. "Just one Chinese flag can get your account suspended," said Wang, a traditional Chinese medicine therapist in the port city of Qingdao. She insists Facebook is biased toward Chinese patriots like her, pointing to Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg's recent China-bashing remarks. "I used to have good feelings about Zuckerberg," Wang said.

A Facebook representative said the company only removes content that violates its community standards. In response to inquiries on two specific fangirl accounts that were disabled or restricted, the representative pointed to policy violations in relation to the use of fake identities, bullying and harassment.

A Twitter representative said it acts against accounts for policy breaches but declined to comment on individual examples citing privacy and security reasons.

Fangirls could disappear as fast as they emerged. That's because nationalist movements are always a double-edged sword for the government, said Chinese University's Fang. "When something self-organizes to a certain size, it becomes a taboo - even if it's only online."

Or they could morph into something more alarming. Zhou, the volunteer leader, has already become a kind of online vigilante, notifying the police about a China-based Weibo user expressing support for Hong Kong. He said he was content that the police quickly identified and arrested the blogger. "We must rally all the forces we can to eradicate the soil that breeds Hong Kong separatists," he said.

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