Co-Constructing a Gender–State Entanglement in Canonical Three Kingdoms Fandom: A Discourse-Historical Approach

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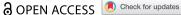Altman Yuzhu Peng [a], Fengshu Liu[b], and Zhen Troy Chen[c]

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a discourse-historical approach (DHA), we analyse how male influencers and their followers co-construct a gender–state entanglement through social-mediated discussions about a mythologised historical figure, Zhuge Liang, on Bilibili. The analysis discovers that the historical figure is portrayed as a *wen–wu* masculinity archetype, whose imaginary is modified against current socio-cultural trends and intertextually linked to China's nation-building project. The masculinist valorisation of the historical figure of Zhuge reiterates the male takeover of nationalist politics as a defining feature of popular cultural production and consumption in post-reform China. The study makes a meaningful contribution to scholarship about Three Kingdoms fandom by showing how past memories and present events converge in Chinese-language social-mediated communication, where heteronormative visions and worldviews are consistently overrepresented.

Introduction

The most well-known period of East Asian ancient history is probably the Three Kingdoms era when China proper was ruled by three separate regimes – Cao-Wei, Shu-Han, and Sun-Wu. The fame of historical figures of the period was a result of court historians' detailed archives and creative writers' high-quality storytelling, with Luo Guanzhong's (approx. CE 1330–1400) novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, being the most famous title (Lei, 2014). Narrating the Three Kingdoms stories in a reader-friendly way, Luo's novel has immortalised a list of historical figures in the collective memories of the Chinese people (Tian, 2018). This has allowed such derivative media texts as the film directed by Woo Yu-Sen (*Red Cliff*, 2008) and the TV series produced by China's Central Television channel (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, 1994) and Gao Xixi (*New Three Kingdoms*, 2010) to be created to reach wider audiences (Tian, 2018). In this way, Three Kingdoms-themed historical stories retain their vitality, paving the way for late-modern fandom culture, with its typically gendered imagination of male figures, to flourish.

A key feature of contemporary media consumption is the participatory turn, which is characterised by audiences' organisation of social-mediated fandom (Fung, 2019). New forms of engagement with Three Kingdoms stories have emerged amid the participatory turn. Amongst them, male-homoerotic fiction and gender-switching videos, mainly produced by and spread among heterosexual women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, have captured much scholarly attention (see e.g., Tian, 2015; Wang, 2020). Catering to non-orthodox spectators, these fan-created media texts often depict male historical figures of the Three Kingdoms as romantic partners in imagined relationships (Tian, 2015). This trend marks the diversification of gender representations in the post-reform era, in part as a result of the cross-border penetration of Japanese boys' love literature (Ng & Li, 2023; Tan et al., 2022; Zhao, 2020).

The emergence of non-canonical fandom has never changed the male takeover of mainstream Three Kingdoms-themed media consumption, which is informed by the historical process through which such media texts are created. Kam Louie (2002) has identified the masculinist values embedded in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* through a close reading of the original novel. In his terms, indigenous Chinese masculinity is constructed upon *wen* and *wu* (文武) archetypes, embodied by idealised imaginaries of civil ministers and generals, respectively. Both *wen* and *wu* archetypes reflect a degree of *yin–yang* balance, meaning that the possession of cultural attainment (*wen*) and martial valour (*wu*) is required for a male ideal, regardless of the archetype he represents (Song & Hird, 2014). As such, we have witnessed Zhuge Liang's military accomplishments being exaggerated, despite him being typically viewed as a civil minister, as well as Guan Yu's history-reading habit being highlighted, notwithstanding his embodiment of an idealised warrior (Louie, 2002).

As China has been reintegrated into the global community, its ideal manhood has undergone a drastic process of redefinition (see Choi & Peng, 2016; Liu & Lin, 2023; Miao & Tian, 2022; Xiao, 2011). In this process, new interpretations of Three Kingdoms' historical figures have emerged with audiences' consumption of contemporary media texts. Such interpretations are created at the nexus of gender and state politics, which emerges as a defining characteristic of storytelling of the past and narration of the present (Wodak, 2009). An acknowledgement of the male takeover of canonical Three Kingdoms fandom is required to account for the gender–state entanglement therein.

In this article, we foreground Chinese-language social-mediated storytelling for heteronormative male audiences in canonical Three Kingdoms fandom. The study examines how male influencers have re-narrated Zhuge's stories on Bilibili, in recognition of his importance throughout Three Kingdoms history and his embodiment of a masculinity archetype in traditional Chinese culture (Louie, 2002). Adopting a discourse-historical approach (DHA), we elucidate how the mythologised historical figure is established as a male ideal to embody a desirable model of *wen–wu* masculinity specific to China's post-reform consumer culture and political climate. Such discursive practices indicate how the narration of ancient history is used by male influencers and their followers to articulate heteronormative agendas in both gender and state politics. This phenomenon not only reiterates the masculinist nature of China's canonical Three Kingdoms fandom and nationalist politics but also offers a glimpse of global right-wing populism playing out in the East Asian region, amid the intensification of geopolitical tensions between China and the West.

Entangled Gender and State Politics

Gender politics alone does not explain the power dynamics within canonical Three Kingdoms fandom, given the salience of the patriarchal nation-state system (Rai, 2002) and its entangled relations with historical memories and contemporary events (Richardson & Wodak, 2009). In this context it is necessary to develop analytical frameworks that foreground the inherent intersection of gender and state politics in China. Such a gender–state entanglement is not limited to the Chinese context. According to Cynthia Enloe (1989, 44), the nation-state has always been constitutive of 'masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope'. Feminine metaphors (e.g., motherlands) are widely used to symbolise nations, but female citizens are paradoxically denied 'any direct relation to the national agency' (McClintock, 1993, 62). This is evidenced by the dominant role played by men and male ideals in the global political system (Rai, 2002) and the continuous problematisation of feminine qualities in leadership discourses (Mullany & Schnurr, 2022).

In the Chinese context, the gender–state entanglement has long been manifesting in nationalist rhetoric, taking the form of a 'masculinity crisis' discourse, which problematised its male citizens' qualities, due to foreign invasions that damaged their control over the nation-state (Liu, 2019). During the early stage of the economic reforms launched in the late 1970s, the masculinity-crisis discourse was energised by official propaganda that called the qualities of Chinese men into question, as a consequence of male workers' loss of life-tenure positions at state-owned enterprises, which undermined their hegemony in the family and, by extension, wider society (Yang, 2010). While raising objections to such gender dynamics, the masculinity-crisis discourse has never challenged the patriarchy of China's socioeconomic and political infrastructure (Liu, 2019). Instead, it has rationalised the dominance by heteronormative men over the nation-state, which dialectically relates to their quest for hegemony in the public sphere (Fang & Repnikova, 2018).

The recent debate about 'little fresh meats' (小鲜肉) is indicative of a resumption in public concern over the masculinity crisis in China. Embodied by allegedly effeminate male idols, little fresh meats are feminised, homoerotic imaginaries of men, who are created to cater to the changing tastes and preferences of post-reform consumers (G. Song, 2022). Little fresh meats are often subject to public criticism for not adhering to conventional gender norms, despite being popular objects of affection in non-canonical fandom, which is mainly comprised of heterosexual women and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Zhao, 2020). A salient feature of the backlash against little fresh meats is its support from the state, which was evident in the government's mobilisation of propaganda apparatuses to condemn the effeminate turn of China's popular cultural production and its use of censorship to ban homoerotic representations of men on TV and in film (Yu & Sui, 2022). The latter measure forced many young male idols to change their self-branding strategies almost overnight in late 2021 to survive the official anti-effeminate campaign (Ng & Li, 2023). This campaign has been engineered against the backdrop of intensified geopolitical frictions between China and other countries, which have given rise to a 'Wolf Warrior'-type of masculinist male ideal at a time of manufactured national crisis (Peng et al., 2023).

It should be noted that the fanbases of little fresh meats have their own toxic elements, with evidence suggesting that many members of non-canonical fandom have self-

essentialised patriarchal norms and have actively aligned themselves with the state-backed anti-effeminate campaign (see Ge, 2022; Liu, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Nonetheless, heteronormative men have projected the most vibrant voices against little fresh meats, in the name of protecting the manly qualities of young men, which is in line with the official rhetoric (G. Song, 2022). The state-backed anti-effeminate campaign, together with grassroots heteronormative men's support for it, has reinforced the broader male takeover of Chinese politics and society. The entangled top-down and bottom-up processes playing out in the process are a notable feature of China's gender and state politics, which are characterised by their representation of heteronormative visions and worldviews. With such entangled processes in mind, this article sheds light on the bottom-up dynamics of the gender–state entanglement by unpacking the discursive negotiation of Zhuge's imagery in social-mediated canonical Three Kingdoms fandom.

A Discourse-Historical Approach

A discourse-historical approach (DHA) helps to foreground the gender–state entanglement in canonical Three Kingdoms fans' re-narration of Zhuge's ideal gender qualities and his relevance to China's nation-building project. Developed by Ruth Wodak (2009), DHA prescribes a specific genre of critical discourse studies (CDS), reflecting an intellectual endeavour to scaffold the pursuit of progressive agenda through sociolinguistic intervention (KhosraviNik, 2022). The theoretical foundation of DHA resonates with other CDS scholarship, such as Norman Fairclough's (2013) dialectical-relational approach and Tuen van Dijk's (2009) socio-cognitive approach, and shares their goal of making critical assessments of the pivotal role language plays in societal processes. DHA considers language as a form of social practice, regardless of the format and the modality in which it is used (Fairclough, 2013). A discourse is, thus, defined as a 'way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, 90). Following the traditions of critical scholarship, this approach exposes how various discourses are socially constructed to serve dominant interests (Richardson & Wodak, 2009).

With particular attention to the linkages between historical memories and contemporary events, the analytical scope of DHA makes possible immanent, socio-diagnostic, and prognostic critiques (Wodak, 2009). Immanent critiques are primarily accomplished through a linguistic interpretation of texts to reveal the 'inconsistencies, (self-)contradictions, paradoxes, and dilemmas' in their discourse structures (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, 89). This paves the way for cognition-oriented, socio-diagnostic critiques and action-specific, prognostic critiques, which respectively articulate how the discourse structures function in communicative processes against wider contexts and how to inform institutional changes to address the social wrongs caused by such discourse structures (Richardson & Wodak, 2009). To this end, DHA distinguishes between three aspects of discourse, including 'textual meanings and structures' (the topics being communicated), 'discursive strategies' (conscious or subconscious repetitions of communicating style), and the 'linguistic means that are drawn upon to realise both topics and strategies' (Wodak, 2009, 38).

A salient feature of DHA is its methodological categorisation of discursive strategies, which typically consist of nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and

intensification/mitigation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Nomination refers to how a person or an object is named, and it serves as a starting point that permits an in-group/out-group membership to be defined (Richardson & Wodak, 2009). Predication involves making a statement through the attribution of specific characteristics to a subject, which renders the 'discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/processes, and actions' (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, 94). Argumentation refers to how 'content-related warrants' are developed to bridge arguments and conclusions in a particular manner, 'and hence provide justification of the latter' (Richardson & Wodak, 2009, 255). These three strategies are used in conjunction with perspectivation and intensification/mitigation, which respectively position the involved communicator's viewpoint and modify the 'epistemic status of a proposition' to amplify the persuasiveness of ideology-specific messages, so as to assist the (re)production power relations in communicative actions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, 97). This article adopts DHA to foreground how heteronormative members of the canonical Three Kingdoms fan community adopt various discursive strategies to co-construct desirable Chinese masculinities that are intimately interwoven with their nationalistic worldviews.

Research Questions and Methods

The primary source of evidence used in this study was videos about Zhuge Liang shared on Bilibili. Zhuge was the first prime minister of the Shu-Han regime, and historians have acknowledged his outstanding military accomplishments (Louie, 2002). He is widely considered the hero of Luo's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and continues to be portrayed as a male ideal by contemporary audiences (Tian, 2018), although heteronormative women and LGBTQ+ fans have created alternative interpretations of him (Wang, 2020). Bilibili, a Chinese-language video-sharing site situated within a niche fandom market (Chen, 2021), offers a key platform for fans' engagement with Three Kingdoms-themed media texts. While aggregating influencers to share original videos of various genres, the platform also enables fans to participate in social-mediated discussions (Yang, 2020). In particular, Bilibili supports the posting of superimposed comments 'running across the screen as [the] video plays' (Zhang & Cassany, 2020, 484), known as *danmaku*. This function 'unites' Bilibili users 'with a collective temporal experience of simultaneous viewing', which allows for their collaborative reflections on specific focal points of the video of their own choice (Li, 2017, 248). Participation in *danmaku* postings has evolved into a 'collective social action that is recognised and understood by Bilibili users', enabling them to 'build alignment and enact different identities' within the fan community (Teng & Chan, 2022, 419). With this function, Bilibili has emerged as a pioneer and the most popular of its kind in China's social media ecology, aggregating a total of more than 90 million monthly visitors and 4 million subscribed users (Zhang & Cassany, 2020).

The empirical research was underpinned by the following research questions, which were inspired by Wodak's (2009) DHA, with a consideration of the interactive nature of social-mediated communication (Bouvier, 2022) on Bilibili:

(1) How do male Bilibili influencers use different discursive strategies to establish Zhuge Liang as a male ideal in their videomaking?

(2) How do fellow Bilibili users continue to negotiate the imaginary of Zhuge through their *danmaku* postings?

(3) How does the co-construction of Zhuge's imaginary reveal the masculine nature of nationalist politics in canonical Three Kingdoms fandom?

Adopting Bilibili's search engine and using Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮) as a keyword, we located the top two videos on its most-watched list and extrapolated both videos and all embedded *danmaku* comments. These two videos were purposively selected, in light of Max Weber's (1949) advice to select case studies based on their potential to address focal issues. Both videos attracted large volumes of views and upvotes that put them at the forefront of the Bilibili-based Three Kingdoms fan community. They were shared by male influencers, with the first posted by an influencer with 24,000 followers and the second by one with 1.8 million followers.

The first video, titled 'Smearing Zhuge Liang with no logic! Are these people eligible to teach at all' (无脑抹黑诸葛亮! 这种人也配教育学生), was posted on 28 April 2021 by a male micro-Bilibili influencer nicknamed Fumo. With a total of 329 million views, 151,000 upvotes, and 1,337 *danmaku* comments, the video served as a response to the negative comments about Zhuge made by a female influencer in April 2021. The female influencer's comments went against the traditional perception of Zhuge as an exemplary ancient civil minister with high moral standards, and provoked a backlash from canonical Three Kingdoms fandom where members tended to identify with the idealised imaginary of the Shu-Han prime minister. Fumo's video was 13:59 in length and was packaged in a three-part, fact-checking format. The first part lasted until 04:07, offering a recapitulation of the female influencer's allegedly false claims about Zhuge. The second part (between 4:08 and 09:57) specified Fumo's account of these claims. This was followed by the final section (starting at 09:58), which assessed the wider implications of these claims. The second and third parts remixed Fumo's voiceover with videos extrapolated from previous Three Kingdoms-themed media texts. This video was a successful instance of user engagement measured by its views, upvotes, and *danmaku* comments in Fumo's posting history. It demonstrated how the male influencer capitalised on the backlash against a female influencer for his user engagement on Bilibili.

Titled 'Zhuge Liang shines more in official historical archives than in Romance [of the Three Kingdoms]. What kind of hunk is he' (正史比演义还神的诸葛亮, 到底是什么级别的猛男), the second video garnered 176 million views, 110,000 upvotes, and 3,600 *danmaku* comments. It was posted on 10 December 2021 by a male mega-influencer known as Dushede Nangua (hereafter Nangua), who primarily re-narrated stories of Zhuge in a contemporary audience-friendly manner. Using the word 'hunk' to name Zhuge, the title made explicit his gendered portrayal of the Shu-Han prime minister right from the beginning. This video was similar to the first one in terms of its positive notes on Zhuge's characteristics and its remixing of the male influencer's own voiceover and footage of Three Kingdoms-themed films and TV series. However, the second video, which was 29:03 in length, focused overwhelmingly on the 'heroic deeds' of the historical figure without explicit references to alternative interpretations of his imaginary at a textual level.

Aggregating thousands of *danmaku* postings, these videos prompted extended discussions about Zhuge and his political/military accomplishments from differing angles.

In particular, the two videos received similar levels of user engagement but were posted by influencers positioned at micro- and mega-tiers, respectively. They constituted a pair, offering the scope to elucidate how the imaginary of the historical figure was co-created by male Bilibili influencers and fellow Three Kingdoms fans in social-mediated interactions.

In the analysis that follows we first identify how differing discursive strategies were invoked in the sampled Bilibili videos to construct the imaginary of Zhuge and emphasise both the historical contingency and contemporary relevance of his embodiment of ideal manhood. We scrutinise the voiceover of the videos, with their content being considered visual aids to account for the multimodal nature of the communicative processes (Machin, 2016). The analytical focus was not only a result of our adoption of DHA but also because the visual content was produced by remixing footage from different media sources, which complicated the selection and usage of the content in the video production processes, due to the complexity of authorship involved. This stage of analysis paved the way for further DHA-informed scrutiny of fellow Bilibili users' *danmaku* postings, addressing how the interactivity of social-mediated textual production evolved in the participatory co-construction of Zhuge's imaginary on the platform. Considering the size of the sampled *danmaku* postings, this stage of analysis first adopted a 'zoom-out' strategy, using the word cloud function of NVIVO 12 to offer a glimpse of the entire dataset. A 'zoom-in' strategy was subsequently adopted, focusing on those *danmaku* comments running across the screen when the voiceover being analysed was played. The analysis did not account for traditional comments shared beneath the videos because they were separated from the immediate experiences of videomaking and watching unique to Bilibili.

Data Analysis

The remainder of the article presents the three interrelated themes that jointly reveal how canonical Three Kingdoms fans, including male influencers and their followers, negotiated masculine qualities for Zhuge to make him relevant to their gendered imagination of the Chinese nation-state.

Co-constructing a gaofushuai *with both* wen *and* wu *qualities*

At a textual level, the voiceovers of both videos were synchronised to highlight Zhuge's physique. This rebuilt the historical figure's embodiment of martial valour, alluding to a resumed emphasis on *wu* characteristics in the construction of desirable masculinities. As seen below, Fumo's notes on Zhuge's physique repeatedly referenced Chen Shou, author of *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, who was widely considered to have offered the most high-quality archives of the Three Kingdoms' history:

> **Fumo (7:41–8:14)**: Let me quote Chen Shou's words: '[Zhuge] Liang is gifted since his childhood. [He] is charismatic, 8 [Han] feet tall, and has a robust physique'. According to the Han measurement, a foot is equivalent to approximately 23cm today, so 8 feet must be well beyond 1.8m.

Converting Chen's records into the metric system, the voiceover highlighted the 'fact' of Zhuge being a tall man by exploiting what van Leeuwen (2008, 116) called 'scientific rationalisation', a specific discursive strategy mobilising 'differentiated bodies of knowledge to legitimate' a statement. Emerging as part of a stylised pattern, Fumo's use of the discursive strategy not only amplified the persuasiveness of his argument in social-mediated communication but also substantiated Louie's (2002, 6) theorisation of biology as a 'vital' element embedded in the notion of *wu*.

For Louie (2002), the *wen–wu* paradigm of traditional Chinese masculinity is sometimes misinterpreted as 'feminine', but it merely underscores a unique aspect of the model, which is akin to the (mis)perceived softness of elite manhood in Euro–American societies. The degree to which men's capacity to present a masculine physique is emphasised may have fluctuated over time (Song & Hird, 2014), but this does not change the fact of a male ideal being consistently differentiated from the body of a woman to substantiate his perceived biological advantages (Louie, 2002). Evolving in the post-reform era when gendered bodies became products of global consumer culture, a masculine physique has become entangled with sexual attractiveness to women (Song & Hird, 2014). Against this backdrop, a man's height has transformed into a crucial criterion in defining a man's handsomeness, and at least 1.8m has been widely accepted as an ideal male stature. Fumo's scientific rationalisation of Zhuge's height, which qualifies it for the threshold of an 'ideal' figure (1.8m), has effectively turned historical archives into contemporarily relevant records. It showcases how aspects of the ideal manhood of the present are still being defined against *wu* criteria, although certain connotations of such criteria are reconfigured in ways that valorise a man's competitiveness and earning power in the market economy specific to the post-reform era (Choi & Peng, 2016; Xiao, 2011).

In light of the *wen–wu* paradigm, the idealness of Zhuge's imaginary was simultaneously built upon his embodiment of *wen*. This is illustrated in the following extract from Nangua's voiceover:

> **Nangua (4:52–5:05)**: Zhuge Liang's teacher keeps advertising his top student in the Jingzhou labour market . . . Cao Cao's company is listed on the stock exchange market . . . Meanwhile, Liu Bei is recruiting staff members in Xinye. Liu Bei's start-up business is not even comparable to Cao Cao's. He was born poor and raised by a single mother.

A salient feature of Nangua's voiceover was its frequent use of analogies with which today's audiences were familiar to re-narrate historical events. Describing Zhuge as a 'top student', Nangua created a modern imaginary of Zhuge's *wen* traits – namely, his advanced academic upbringing that made him outstanding amongst his contemporaries. These analogies made the narration more relatable to Nangua's present-day followers. Yet, the frequent use of such analogies simultaneously constituted a stylised repetition, serving to help recontextualise historical events. In this instance, Nangua retold the story of how Zhuge was recruited by his master. Beneath the ostensible idealisation of Zhuge, Nangua packaged a contemporarily relevant masculinist thesis, as he juxtaposed Zhuge and Liu Bei (Zhuge's master) to represent the two ends of the same manhood spectrum. Defining Zhuge as tall and born rich, and Liu as from humble beginnings, the male influencer implicitly juggled the notions of *gaofushuai* (高富帅, literally 'tall, rich, and

handsome') and *diaosi* (屌丝, a slang term for 'loser') to yield a contemporary model of desirable masculinity.

Gaofushuai has become a contemporary archetype of desirable masculinity (Yang, 2014, 141). This archetype entails both *wen* and *wu* traits, but is specifically constructed against the backdrop of China's post-socialist economic reforms. After Mao's era, the government launched a series of economic reform policies, incorporating Euro–American neoliberal means to (de)regulate the everyday lives of the people without altering the party-state's political dominance (Harvey, 2007). As social stratification becomes institutionalised, a neoliberal regime of morality has come into being, linking moral probity ever more closely to one's self-reliance and entrepreneurship (Liu, 2019). As the government has departed from its promotion of Maoist 'gender-neutral' role models and thereby facilitated the re-essentialisation of sex differences in popular discourses (Yang, 2010; 2011), business success has become a key measurement of a man's self-esteem and self-actualisation (Choi & Peng, 2016; Xiao, 2011). This process has legitimised the male domination of socioeconomic resources, rationalising the desirability of *gaofushuai* as an illustration of women's 'natural' aspiration to be with powerful men (Gong, 2016). Interestingly, the use of the term *gaofushuai* constantly collocates with *diaosi* as a pair. The discourse of *diaosi* often takes the form of self-mockery, whereby young men reveal their 'disillusionment with the apparent lack of possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility' (Szablewicz, 2014, 259). While appearing to question the *gaofushuai* model of masculinist successes, the discourse of *diaosi* has arguably reinforced 'many of the norms and values that it seemingly intends to mock', given its subtextual references to 'material wealth, physical appearance, and sexual stereotypes' (Szablewicz, 2014, 269).

Zhuge's stature, along with his background in a wealthy official family, readily qualified him as a *gaofushuai*. Interestingly, Nangua's voiceover summarised the Three Kingdoms' history as a story of how a *diaosi* (Liu) established a new and flourishing empire from scratch, with the help of a *gaofushuai* (Zhuge), to conquer mighty, seemingly unwieldy enemies. The emphasis on Liu's later success in founding the empire despite his *diaosi* background effectively highlighted Zhuge's irreplaceable contributions through his knowledge and wisdom, as well as through his military capacity. In this manner, Zhuge was established as a *wen–wu* ideal, with a reference to his decisive role in forming the Shu-Han regime. For canonical fans of the Three Kingdoms, this offers a foundation for constructing the gender–state nexus.

Fumo's and Nangua's videos were not posted in isolation but provided grassroots fans with media texts to engage in Three Kingdoms-themed storytelling. This engagement was facilitated by the *danmaku* function of the social media platform. The limited length of *danmaku* postings prevented extended meaning-making, but these postings created a 'sense of a shared, participatory experience for [Bilibili] users, where they feel that they are watching and talking with other viewers simultaneously' (Lazar & Sun, 2020, 3). As a general trend revealed by the word cloud (Figure 1), the sampled *danmaku* postings were an extension of the video content focusing on historical figures of the Three Kingdoms period. This was evidenced by their names, positions, and nicknames being frequently referenced in the dataset (e.g., Zhuge Liang: 456 hits; prime minister: 367 hits; Liu Bei: 305 hits; Cao Cao: 113 hits; Guan Yu: 53 hits; Sun Quan: 49 hits; crouching dragon: 51 hits). As a result, multiple portrayals of these historical figures were co-

Figure 1. A cloud of frequently used words

constructed in a self-reflexive manner, as fellow Bilibili fans generated *danmaku* comments running across the screen when playing the sampled videos.

As seen in the following extract, the *danmaku* commentary, like many postings extrapolated from the sampled videos, was characterised by its briefness and reflected the interface design of the Bilibili platform (Yang, 2020):

> **User-1-788**: However, people from our nation do not respect the great man of our history.

Omitting specific objects at a textual level, the brief *danmaku* commentary synchronised with the videos by using a similar nomination strategy, referring to Zhuge as the 'great man' in China's ancient history. The posting reaffirmed both male influencers' positive portrayals of the Shu-Han prime minister. With the narrative overwhelmingly sympathising with the Shu-Han regime, the weakest force in the Three Kingdoms triangle, the idealised portrayal of Zhuge was encoded with heteronormative men's self-reflexive contemplation of their perceived disadvantageous socioeconomic position in an increasingly stratified China on one hand, and their paradoxical alignment of personal fate with the prosperity of the nation-state on the other.

Delegitimising alternative narratives for a masculinist, nationalistic agenda

Both male influencers' videos were marked by a masculinist logic, as evidenced not only by their establishment of Zhuge as a contemporary *gaofushuai* with both *wen* and *wu* qualities but also by their rejection of alternative narratives about him. Fumo's discursive practice was the most representative on this front. By raising objections to a female influencer's differing, negative portrayal of Zhuge as an overestimated historical figure, Fumo's voiceover constantly invoked litotes to affirm his proposition to defend the idealness of the Shu-Han prime minister. Challenging the female influencer's negative portrayal of Zhuge, Fumo expressed the motives behind his videomaking upon his self-identification as one working in the teaching profession:

> **Fumo (4:38–4:47)**: I must clarify one thing. First, I worked in the education sector as well, and I refuse to call her a 'teacher'. You cannot tarnish the reputation of teachers [by spreading lies] because this is the fundamental value of working in the sector.

Use of perspectivation was evident in Fumo's discursive strategy. This strategy positioned him on a moral high ground, allowing him to recontextualise his criticisms of the female influencer by linking them to concerns for the younger generation. This discursive strategy created a subtle link between his commentaries on a single female influencer and the wider socio-political agendas for which he pushed, as the following excerpt shows:

> **Fumo (11:55–12:04)**: Where do you often see this kind of person? In Ponzi schemes! Now you understand, right? This also includes such 'female boxers' (女拳师) . . . , who use very similar, cunning tactics to brainwash you into becoming her worshippers.

As seen in this extract, Fumo's socio-political perspective was gendered. Immediately following his detailed criticisms of the female influencer, Fumo offered his assessment of her motives. The assessment was problematic because it criticised the influencer's click-baiting user-engagement tactics without contemplating his own conduct. It became apparent that Fumo failed to recognise his participation in the influencer economy, marking a paradoxical, unreflexive dimension of his self-reflection that delegitimised a fellow (female) practitioner's very existence. More importantly, the assessment entailed a blatant insult to feminists as an entire group, revealed by his description of them as 'female boxers', and their metaphorical categorisation as cult leaders. The insult appeared to be beside the focal point, but it occurred in the context of the gender antagonism that has evolved in Chinese-language social-mediated communication.

In recent years, gender-issue debates in China have become increasingly polarised and social media platforms have played host to most of these debates. Self-empowered, young urban women have used these platforms to mobilise 'various discursive and material practices in their struggles' against patriarchal oppression (Wu & Dong, 2019, 471). Albeit with limitations, such as by self-essentialising global neoliberal consumerism (Bouvier & Chen, 2021) and marginalising their working-class contemporaries (Yin & Sun, 2021), these young urban women's praxes have contributed to the global MeToo movement in a way that can be compared to the digital feminist activism of the Global North. However, these collective responses by Chinese women have antagonised hetero-normative members of the male cohort, enabling counter-discourses to gain traction in the social media sphere. In this process, the term 'female boxer', which has evolved from its etymological origin of 'female fist' and was 'once a symbol of female strength and militancy', has emerged as a slang term popularly used to vilify all women with feminist tendencies, regardless of their views (Yang et al., 2022, 10). The unseen logic here mirrors Raewyn Connell's (2005) observation of the construction of authentic masculinity, which exacerbates gender antagonism in Euro–American societies by highlighting heteronormative men's subjectivity on one hand and excluding alternative narratives on the other.

Many *danmaku* postings echoed the thesis of Fumo's videomaking insofar as they rejected alternative, negative interpretations of Zhuge's mythologised image. Continuing the male influencer's critique and its emphasis on the nationality of those providing the alternative interpretations, the implicit logic of the postings was that people should support their nation without reservation. It set the tone for a barrage of similar *danmaku* commentaries and contributed to the creation of an echo chamber on Bilibili that projected vibrant nationalist voices through the storytelling of a cisgender male historical figure, as these posts show:

User-1-1013: Intentionally misleading students should be considered a criminal offence!!!

User-1-1092: Isn't she a spy from the inside???

User-1-1167: She must be a spy! [She] is trying to destroy our national dignity by smearing a near-perfect figure in China's ancient history!

User-1-1233: Ring the police! [She] is trying to distort our history and smearing the image of China's historical figures. Did [she] learn this from the Japanese?

As reflected in these posts, social media users appropriated a conspiracy theory-like argumentation strategy to rationalise their attempt to suppress alternative narratives of China's ancient history that conflicted with the government's official rhetoric. The discursive strategy was built upon an interlocked pattern of justification, which first predicated the propagation of such alternative narratives as acts of espionage that were carried out in collusion with China's external enemies and then advocated for such posts to be reported to the authorities as a means of countering such malicious acts. Although limited to the scope of historical storytelling, the discourse underscored how domestic dissent was delegitimised in a nationalist echo chamber, where China's official censorship over freedom of expression was heavily reiterated by the pro-government masses.

The socio-political relevance of these *danmaku* postings lies in their symbolic representation of participatory censorship in China. Existing literature tends to observe China's social media censorship through a state-vs-activist lens, appropriating a top-down model of control to articulate the role of censors (King et al., 2017; Wang, 2015). However, considering the size of China's social media population, the censorship system also relies on digital infrastructure to facilitate the pro-regime masses' self-voluntary 'accusatory reporting' of dissenting opinions (Luo & Li, 2022, 15), which effectively amplifies the government's capacity to regulate social-mediated information flows in the absence of state agents (Wang & Ge, 2023). Merely substantiating the participatory censorship within the discursive realm, the *danmaku* postings analysed above, however, show how accusatory reporting may unfold as the nationalist masses encounter discourses conflicting with official rhetoric. This illustrates the socio-political modulation of social media users' self-voluntary participation in state censorship (L. Song, 2022).

Applauding a cisgender male historical figure as a gendered state asset

The gender–state entanglement determines that historical storytelling often expresses nationalist sentiments via masculinist discourses. This phenomenon was evident in Nangua's video through its distinctive opening, which featured a 1:25-long prologue. The prologue appeared to be unconnected with the Three Kingdoms insofar as it told a story of how members of a Southern ethnic-minority community fought against the Japanese invaders during World War II to protect China's territorial integrity. The prologue did not reveal the source of the story; nor did it mention the name of Zhuge until 0:51 when Nangua claimed that the ethnic-minority people's 'patriotic behaviour' was a result of their ancestors' oath of allegiance to the Shu-Han regime. But the narrator ignored that Shu-Han constantly faced ethnic-minority rebellions during its existence. The prologue was informed by a Sinocentric worldview, which marginalised the perspectives and experiences of ethnic-minority communities (Leibold, 2010).

> **Fumo (13:33–13:52)**: Shu Han and Zhuge Liang have such positive images in the eyes of the public. Thus, they would do whatever they can to smear Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang . . . Now we all know their tricks, but what about our children? Do you not feel ashamed for lying to the children of your own country?

Although absent at a literal level, similar nationalist rhetoric was implicit in Fumo's videomaking, which generated a far-fetched predication that linked his target female influencer's business conduct to an orchestrated disinformation campaign aiming to distort China's official narrative about its ancient history. Pointing towards the perceived repercussions for China's younger generation, the predication conveniently channelled public attention from domestic discontent to China's external enemies. In this way, the voiceover not only reiterated the Shu-Han prime minister's embodiment of ideal manhood but also qualified his idealised imaginary as an asset for the modern construction of the Chinese nation-state. It discursively redefined the historical past with present-day social-mediated events as part of a contemporary nation-building project, a phenomenon that has been widely observed in canonical history fandom (Liu, 2018). This highlighted the gendered nature of nationalist discourses, which constantly communicate their political agenda with a masculinist veneer.

> **Nangua (17:53–18:02)**: Elites and the wealthy are annexing lands, so Zhuge Liang has to act as if he were Liu Bei, making laws and using economic measures to fight against the annexation of land. Our socialist, Shu-viet nation [社会主义蜀维埃政权] must ensure that capitalists' influence is minimised and under control.

With the gender–state entanglement in mind, Nangua's narration of Zhuge's stories showcased how he appealed to the nationalist masses within canonical Three Kingdoms fandom. As seen in the above extract, Nangua used terms such as 'our socialist, Shu-viet nation' to create analogies that intertextually compared the Shu-Han regime led by Zhuge to contemporary China under the communist administration. Praising an ancient monarchy using affective language, the male influencer projected his subtextual, positive notes on the nation-state upon his distorted and conflated narration of the past. These narratives were aligned with official rhetoric, such as the notion of harmonious society being propagated to conceal China's inter-ethnic frictions and class struggles both during the revolutionary period and in the post-reform era (Talmacs & Peng, 2023).

> **Nangua (14:50–15:01)**: Making an analogy, Zhuge Liang's status in the Shu-Han regime is the same as that of Premier Zhou [in China]. Reading China's modern history, you would find Premier Zhou's achievements in archives of all important events. He always considers the big picture, no matter what thorny issues he is dealing with.

Nangua's storytelling made his political stance explicit, as he made another analogy between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Enlai. As the inaugural premier of the communist government, Zhou has been consistently portrayed as an ideal statesman in official propaganda. This pre-existing imaginary of the politician was evidently well received by the public (Liu, 2019), thereby enabling Nangua to further advocate for his nationalist agenda by using anecdotes of the past to allude to the present. With both Zhuge and Zhou being cisgender men and repeatedly mythologised as male ideals, the storytelling implicitly contributed to the collective creation of gendered memories among Chinese people, which were archived through the lens of heteronormative men and embodied by

their performance of desirable masculinities. In this sense, Nangua's video, along with that of Fumo, emerged as ideal-type cases that illustrated how male influencers have engaged nationalist, heteronormative audiences in the Chinese-language social media sphere. This demonstrates the existence of the gender–state entanglement within canonical Three Kingdoms fandom, which is consistent with the fandomised practices of nationalist politics in contemporary China (Liu, 2018).

Unlike those extrapolated from Fumo's video, the tone of the *danmaku* postings in Nangua's video was set by User-2-1982, who linked Zhuge's embodiment of ideal manhood to Zhou's image as a statesman: '1,664 years later, a similar great man was born, and he eventually succeeded!' The linkage was not explicit at a literal level but was intertextually established through the reference to the 1,664-year difference between the former's death and the latter's birth (Zhuge: CE 181–234; Zhou: CE 1898–1976). Such a pattern of textual production was noteworthy insofar as it facilitated the *danmaku* poster's performance of authentic fan identity, by means of communicating his knowledge about fan objects, a phenomenon that has been widely observed in various genres of fandom (Williams, 2011). However, it was the underlying masculinist valorisation of both ancient and modern politicians' masculine traits that made this discursive structure salient:

> **User-2-1513**: Eastern Wu (东吴) is such a dog! I could not imagine that the Soviet Union once plotted against us with the US. They were fxxxing stupid!

> **User-2-3135**: What the US does today is similar to what Cao Aman did in the past.

> **User-2-3139**: Today's international relations are very similar to that amongst the Three Kingdoms.

> **User-2-3138**: Today, China is equivalent to the Shu-Han regime at its primetime, and the US is like Cao Wei.

As seen in these extracts, *danmaku* postings retrieved from the second video used a similar, sloppy simile – relations among the Three Kingdoms – to interpret the current international geopolitical order. This simile was built upon the power dynamics in the Sino–US–Russian triangle, where the Sino–Russian strategic partnership was compared to the Shu–Wu alliance, which shared a love–hate relationship in their journey of challenging the most powerful regime or nation of their time (i.e., the US and Cao-Wei). The discourse exploited the timeless admiration of an 'underdog story', underlining Chinese audiences' appreciation of the Shu-Han regime under Zhuge in their consumption of historical storytelling. It also fed into China's post-reform political climate, where the desire to criticise the international political order dominated by the US-led coalition has emerged as a central theme (Zhang, 2022).

The recent rise of nationalism in China is inseparable from the government's propaganda campaigns, which have mobilised official media and sponsored popular cultural productions to legitimise the party-state's rule (Liu, 2018) amidst the growing social stratification that has undermined its legitimacy in the post-reform era (Schneider, 2018). Nationalism has been evidently engineered by the state and serves its agenda (Chen et al., 2019), but it has received overwhelming grassroots support in a world where a revival of right-wing populism and Cold War mentalities has hampered sensible public debate in

both the West and the East (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). China and the major Western democracies have drifted away from each other, despite their ongoing and close economic relations (Schneider, 2018). Anti-Americanism has become a defining characteristic of the nationalism espoused by China's pro-government masses. In this process, an attempt to re-narrate its own history from a Sinocentric perspective that privileges the state's interests has repeatedly appeared in popular discourses and has been voluntarily fuelled by the public (Liao & Xia, 2022; Yang & Fang, 2023). This socio-political climate has redefined the meaning of popular culture in the Chinese context, turning nationalist politics into a pivotal part of fandom participation (Liu, 2018).

In light of the gender–state entanglement, nationalism has been encoded with an underlayer of masculinist hope for strong state leadership, which is rooted in the historically entrenched male domination of the nation-state (Enloe, 1989). Against this backdrop, canonical Three Kingdoms fandom, which incubates social-mediated storytelling about the past through the scope of a heteronormative vision, has merged with the masculinist state's political agenda in its marginalisation of alternative narratives. This has been clearly revealed by the *danmaku* postings analysed in this article, which illustrate how the anti-US official rhetoric is echoed by Bilibili users in their self-reflexive consumption of Three Kingdoms-themed media texts. This focus on canonical Three Kingdoms fandom does not imply that non-canonical fandom is unproblematic and impervious to the same tendencies, especially given the perpetuation of nationalist worldviews and heteronormative values in such alternative popular cultural spheres (Ge, 2022; Liu, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Instead, we have shown how canonical Three Kingdoms fandom has become a proxy for nationalist politics within the Chinese-language social media sphere, which is underlain by the masculinist idolisation of both historical figures and modern politicians. These findings provide further evidence of the nationalism that pervades China's fandom culture (Liu, 2018), and in doing so we have drawn attention to the often overlooked and unseen gender power dynamics that were noted in Geng Song's (2022) study of the state-backed anti-effeminate campaign.

Concluding Remarks

This article has used Bilibili videos uploaded by male influencers to illustrate how gender and state politics are entangled in China's canonical Three Kingdoms fandom culture. As the DHA-informed analysis reveals, male influencers specialising in Three Kingdoms-themed storytelling have mobilised various discursive strategies to re-narrate the history of the period, establishing Zhuge Liang as an ideal statesman who embodies traditional Chinese masculinity. The masculinist valorisation of this historical figure reflects the vitality of China's *wen–wu* model, which has been modified to meet post-reform consumer demands and aspirations but still shapes contemporary Chinese audiences' understanding of desirable masculinities. Zhuge's masculinist valorisation is explicitly nationalistic, which was revealed by both male influencers' and their followers' reiteration of historical memories that reinforce heteronormative men's dominance of the nation-state. In this context, the underlying discourse has simultaneously portrayed the Shu-Han prime minister as a gendered state asset and delegitimised alternative interpretations of his image that are not consistent with nationalist politics. Although their foci differed, the two male influencers' narrations of historical events reveal the appeals

they intended to make to address and attract large cohorts of Three Kingdoms fans, whose worldviews are aligned with heteronormative and pro-regime values.

The masculinist valorisation of Zhuge has unfolded on the Chinese-language social media platform, Bilibili. Being integrated as a default component of its interface, *danmaku* postings have evolved into a crucial, interactive part of Bilibili users' video-watching experience (Yang, 2020). In this study, the *danmaku* postings retrieved from the sampled videos were an extension of the videomaking and showed how meanings of historical events are co-created by male influencers and their followers in social-mediated communication. In theory, such an interactive pattern of textual production may offer an opportunity for alternative interpretations to emerge (Zhang & Peng, 2023), but our analysis revealed a highly homogenous process of meaning-making in Bilibili users' *danmaku* postings. This, in turn, uncovers the echo chamber that has been constructed in the Chinese-language social media sphere, which is defined by the widespread penetration of masculinist values and nationalist sentiments. By analysing the dialectical relations between gender and state politics, the article has revealed a gender–state prism that informs China's canonical Three Kingdoms fandom.

In this sense, the article differs from other recent studies of the role of gender in Three Kingdoms fandom, which have not focused on the dynamic intersection of gender and state politics (Tian, 2015; Wang, 2020). These studies have revealed the de facto connections between history and nationalism, due to the epistemological foundation that historical narratives provide to nationalist politics (Leibold, 2010). When seen in light of our findings about the masculinity archetypes in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the de facto interconnectedness between history and nationalism would suggest that masculinist storytelling of China's ancient history allows nationalism to be used to justify heteronormative men's dominance of the nation-state. This underscores our key finding about how the gender–state entanglement exists at the heart of canonical Three Kingdoms fandom culture. At the same time, we have no intention of glorifying its non-canonical equivalent, where problematic heteronormative values are also entrenched thanks to the socio-political engineering of China's popular culture in the post-reform era (Ge, 2022; Liu, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018).

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in nationalism on the world stage, which has helped to propagate polarised and even extremist views (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020; Schneider, 2018). In this process, Cold War mentalities have been revived in many countries, leading to the intensification of Sino–Western geopolitical tensions (Zhang, 2022). The repercussions of these developments go beyond international geopolitics and extend to the shaping of gendered power relations at the societal level. In the context of the production and consumption of popular culture in China, the state-backed public backlash against 'little fresh meats' (which have called for alternative representations and interpretations of manhood) has increased the salience of gender due to anxieties about the qualities of future-generation male citizens, who 'ought' to be in charge of the nation-state (G. Song, 2022; Yu & Sui, 2022). The gender–state entanglement of the social-mediated textual production of China's ancient history, as seen on Bilibili, also sheds light on such socio-political dynamics within the Chinese-language social media sphere. This reveals that the nation-state is not only institutionally entrenched but also discursively rationalised as a masculine terrain, where female and non-heteronormative subjects, perspectives, and experiences are marginalised (Peng, 2022).

The evidence bases for this study drew from just two ideal-type case studies, so its findings cannot be overgeneralised to describe all aspects of China's Three Kingdoms fandom. With a focus on the immediate experiences of videomaking and watching on Bilibili, the DHA-informed research design has only examined some aspects of social-mediated communication on the platform. Methodologically, however, the findings showcase the applicability of DHA to the study of social-mediated fandom culture that reuses historical materials or recreates historical memories. With its account of the interactive pattern of textual production within the Chinese social media sphere, this study has enhanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between memories of the past and discourses of the present lying at the intersection of gender and state politics. Resonating with pioneer scholarship in the field (Miao & Tian, 2022; Tan et al., 2022), the article offers a template for future studies of power relations in socially mediated popular culture in China and elsewhere.

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