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Investigating the Fandom Culture in China:

Taking TFBOYS as an Example

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Abstract

Fans are imposing increasing influences on the popular culture. This paper is built upon a research to examine the fans participation with new media technologies in China, using a representative case of TFBoys. In this study, visual and textual analysis are used to investigate the meaning and value of media products made by fans as well as exploring the potentials underlying participatory culture.

Keywords Fandom, participatory culture, media, Chinese fans

Introduction

A few years ago, it might be difficult for one to believe how a Chinese 15-year-old boy sets a new Guinness World Record by after posting a birthday message and get 42,776,438 reposts on the social media (Swatman and Martin, 2015), but this phenomenon makes sense when situated in the current Chinese cyberspace. In recent years, China has witnessed a notable growing of fans online communities and a proliferation of fans activities that are remarkably influencing contemporary media and culture. Though fandom is not a new topic and has been written extensively for its importance in media studies (Jenkins, 1992), with the development and convergence of new media technologies, however, something new is taking place within the debates on fandom culture.

More cites on this topic would be helpful

Instead of being considered as comparatively passive consumers in the communication process, fans are now suggested to be more actively engaging in the popular culture (e.g. Jenkins, 1992; Lee, 2011) and show their potentials in producing a variety of fan-oriented cultural practices with new communication technologies in online spaces

such as social media platforms and fan-based websites. For instance, in fans online communities, fans are producing many media products such as fan-made videos, photos, magazine, and so on, continuously challenging the traditional consumer-producer relationship between the user and mass media. Based on this circumstance, concepts and theories like ‘participatory culture’ and ‘participatory fandom’ are put forward to describe the changes and address the potentials underlying such participation (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins et al., 2016). Meanwhile, such notions are also debated by other scholars who question the empowerment of fans as well as contesting the interaction between fans and mainstream media (Jung and Shim, 2014), adding more complexity to the current debates.

Returning to the country with the largest population, China is now experiencing the tremendous influences brought by the fandom culture, with a report suggested that the fan industry is expecting to reach 15.8 million dollars by 2020 (Yin, 2018), attracting great public and academic interests in fandom studies. At this point, the fans of The Fighting Boys (TFBoys) in China is a representative case that shows many features of fans practices in China. TFBoys is a three-member boy band in which Karry Wang, the

boy we mentioned at the beginning, works as the team leader. Having over 130 million followers on Weibo, TFBoys has become one of the most popular boy band in China whose fans activities is becoming significantly influential and international.

Situated in contemporary China, our research takes fans of TFBoys as an example and attempts to investigate the influences of fans participatory behaviors on fandom culture. Beginning with introducing related basic background information, this papers then provides a conceptual framework on fandom and participatory culture through literature review as well as a description of the research's methodology. Following a textual and visual analysis, the next part presents our initial findings and a critical discussion with reference to the theoretical framework. This paper ends with summarizing key arguments and provide some implications for the further research.

Good structure of the introduction.

Conceptual Framework

With the era entering into Web 2.0, it is suggested that we are now experiencing a trend of 'media convergence' where the content integration, communication channel fusion,

and media terminal integration have closely involved into our daily life (Jenkins & Deuze, 2005). Along with the tendency of media convergence, fans, people who are keen on something or someone with passionate fervor (Thorne & Bruner, 2006), are pointed to show more active engagement in transmedia storytelling and collective intelligence (Thorburn, Jenkins & Seawell, 2003).

Based on his analysis of fandom, the concept of participatory culture is first coined by Henry Jenkins (1992) to depict the active engagement and participation he observes in fans communities. This concept is further deployed by Bennett (2014), pointing out that the four essential elements of participatory culture which often interact with the territory of fandom are communication, creativity, knowledge and organizational and civic power. The similar opinion has been stated by Artieri (2012) who highlights that by using new media technologies, fans have transferred from consumer to producer who could generate, produce and disseminate transmedia content freely. Rather than Good analysis of the literature, not just a collection of facts. passively receiving information, fans are actively engaging in the media practices with utilizing various participatory pathways offered by new media technology, which adding increasing complexity to fandom (Williams & Ho, 2014). Also, various forms

of online fans activities are showing their potentials in producing fan-made media products such as fan-fiction, fan-videos and participating in online discussions about TV shows, which is different from the traditional audience experience (Birds, 2011).

Employing the multiple methods opened to the mass, fan activities of today essentially add cultural meaning and value to the existing media culture (Jung & Shim, 2014).

Are there regional or geographic influences that should be mentioned, since you are focusing on a specific part of the world?

With these research outcomes in mind, we can form a basic idea of the nature of Chinese fans' online behavior, as well as the role of new media technology in the developing process of cultural transformation.

Serving as the space for fans activities, online communities are established to share cultural products, changing the traditional ways of consumer negotiation and shaping a new form of participatory producer culture (Hellekson & Busse, 2006). Apart from the technical aspect, another focus of this research project lies in the fan community where individual fans could be connected with each other, which is defined as an elaboration of the model of 'fan world' (Hills, 2017). In this respect, Theberge (2011) suggests that fan community serves as a space for both fans and artists to perform their identities as participants through sharing stories and specific content. Online fans community not

only serves as a platform for fans to participate in publishing content but also makes fans more cohesive to each other, which enhances their sense of identity and belonging (Baker, 2012). These concepts help us to understand how Chinese fans of today are connected with each other, and how they could share their individual experience in a collective narrative. ^{How?}

Questioning the potentials of such participatory fan behaviors, scholars examine whether fans could change the power structure in media practice (Birds, 2011). Jung and Shim (2014) suggest participatory fan behaviors as a new model of social distribution. The characteristics of this model contain the empowerment of fans and the multi-platform spreading media content. It also could be seen in the interaction and collaboration of bottom-up grassroots aspects as well as corporate-controlled top-down aspects, making the strategic collaboration an important role in the circulation of the production and consumption of media content. Similarly, it has also been discussed by other scholars that the function of lobbying of fans participation enables fans to persuade media organizations to maintain the production of their favorite television shows or keep particular fictional characters on air (Jenkins 1992; 2006), explaining the

interaction between producers and fans in the context of participatory culture. In line with this perspective, an interesting viewpoint is how fans participate in the process of star-making, the case of Chris Li and her corn fans (a nickname of her fans) is very representative (Fung, 2013; Yang, 2009). Fans have the opportunity to present their identity as well as a channel for their collective agency and power, which is thought-provoking considering how fans are contributing to idols' career and contemporary media discourse (Yang, 2009). All these discussions offer us a useful approach to thinking about the changes of the negotiation between Chinese fans and mainstream media producers. How?

Nevertheless, what could be the limitation of fans participation in the established media context? Birds (2011) points out that this kind of potential is indeed limited not only in the form of cyberspace but also in the more general dimension of media practice, especially regarding to the trend of globalization.

With these considerations in mind, this research aims to explore how these kind of participatory behaviors could bring transformation to the fandom culture, along with

examining the connotation, manifestation and significance of such fans participation.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How are fan participatory behaviors changing the fandom culture in an era of new media technology?

Sub-RQ1: How is new media technologies involved in the fans participation?

Sub-RQ2: What are the potentials that fans participatory behaviors might have?

Why not just have three questions, rather than one and two subs?

Methodology

This research is design to approach the question that how participatory behaviors of fans brings changes to the fandom culture. In this sense, we consider that this study should aim at examining the diverse meanings and values of fans behaviors as well as interpreting the various relationship between fans, idols and media within such context, which is in line with the characteristics of qualitative research (Brennen, 2012). Also, this research is conducted within the conceptual framework of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006), in which creativity and engagement of fans are seen as essential elements in Jenkins’ s description. Hence, visual analysis and textual analysis are selected as the method of this research, and we suggest that media content produced by

fans could be seen as an important resource to analyze their engagement in media.

Specifically, we select the fan of TFBoys as a case to exemplify the participatory

behaviors for some features of this boy band that mentioned in the earlier section.

This sentence could use some proofreading.

Research data is based on the media texts we collected from Sina Weibo (a social media

platform in China which also acts as main platform for fans' activities) and other fans'

sites of TFBoys. The data consists of two parts and details are as follow:

- We select one video made by a fan of TFBoys who is also the operator of one well-known fans sites. The video is one of the winning works in the project Shou Xi Pao Zhi Guan (in English translation: the chief cameraman). The project is generated from Street dance of China, a reality show about street dance in which Jackson Yi, one member of TFBoys, has taken part as a leader of a dancing team. Launched by Youku video website, this project calls on fans to submit their fan-made videos or photos of their idols (Weibo, 2018).

Not sure this is correct way to cite a specific post on the platform.

Applicants will be ranked in a list according to their popularity in Weibo comments, reposts and likes and the one who got the first place in the list will be

invited to the recording field and be the cameraman of their idol. In this part, we

Here would be helpful to indicate how the research in the field helps you justify this process.

apply visual analysis to compared this winning fan-made video with the official

version of the same scene. By a close examination of the two videos, we

investigate the style of narratives and connotation of the moving image, we also

What exactly will you be looking for, and how will you identify it when you find it?

collected screenshots of the videos by PC software to exemplify our analysis. In

combination to the textual analysis of fans comments, we suggest using these

data to examine the how fans participate in producing their own media products

and the interaction of mainstream media and fans production.

- We carry out visual and textual analysis of an online magazine of TFBoys produced by fans. The magazine we choose is one issue of Memory of Jackson, the name of a Weibo account and also an online magazine that published every Sunday by fans of Yi (Weibo, 2018). Common and popular among Chinese fans, this kind of magazine are normally not in a formal style and is posted on Weibo in a format of long pictures. Memory of Jackson has synthesized many types of user-generated content, including latest new report or interview related to Yi, photos taken by fans, and cartoon picture created by fans. We use visual

analysis to investigate the fan-made photos in the magazines and textual analysis to interpret the extract of articles written by fans.

However, it is also necessary to point out the limitation of our method. Firstly, the scale of data and the way we interpret the information may influence the validity of conclusions. Besides, as Stokes (2010) suggests, the conclusion may not fit in broader society if texts are used as the only object. Nonetheless, we argue that visual analysis and textual analysis serves as appropriate approaches to examine our research questions by helping us to interpret and represent the value of fans practice as well as understanding the interaction between fans and mass media.

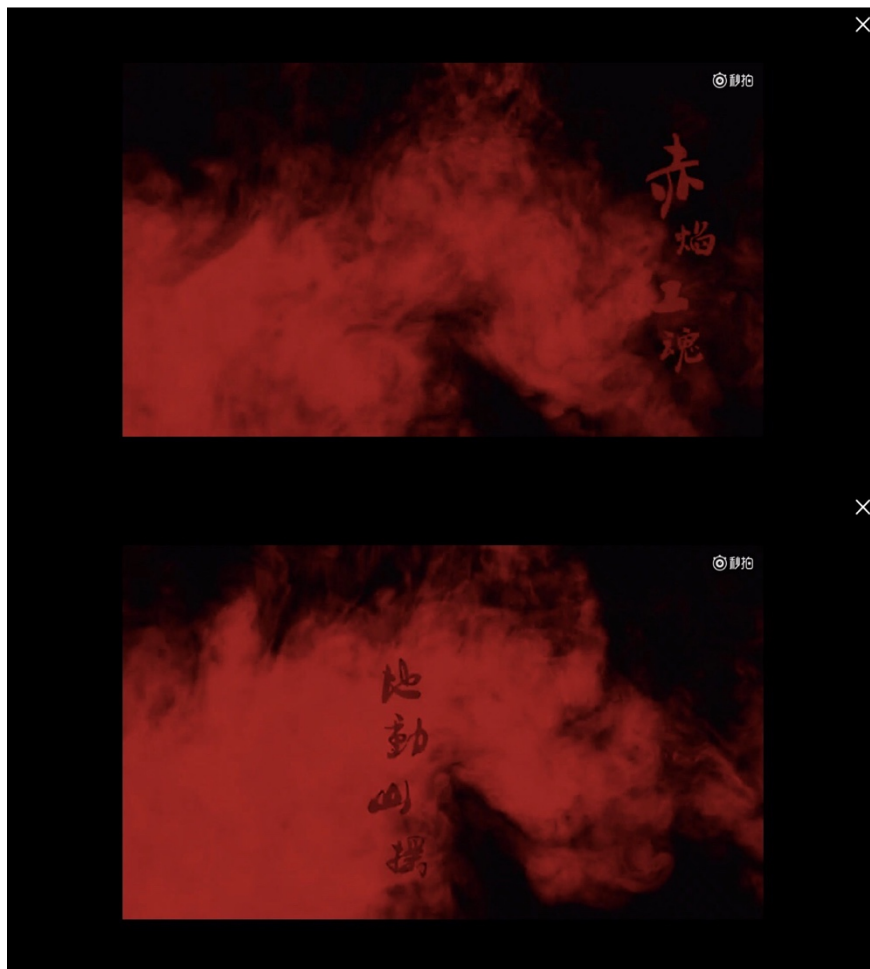
Analysis

At this stage, a pilot study is carried out based on the data we collected. This section would present the initial findings of this project as well as the process of analyzing through the application of the methods mentioned above.

(F=Finding; P=Picture)

F1. Fans tend to produce their versions of ideal images of their idols, instead of merely accepting the established images that produced by entertainment agencies on mainstream media platforms. By analyzing the fan-made video and the original version of Yi's dance performance belief, it is shown the fan-made videos of the performance of Yi have different codes from the original video. The fan-made videos change the meaning of Yi's performance, and also deliver the image of the idol inside the fans, by showing what fits the idol better in their point of view.

What specific elements will you be identifying in this analysis?

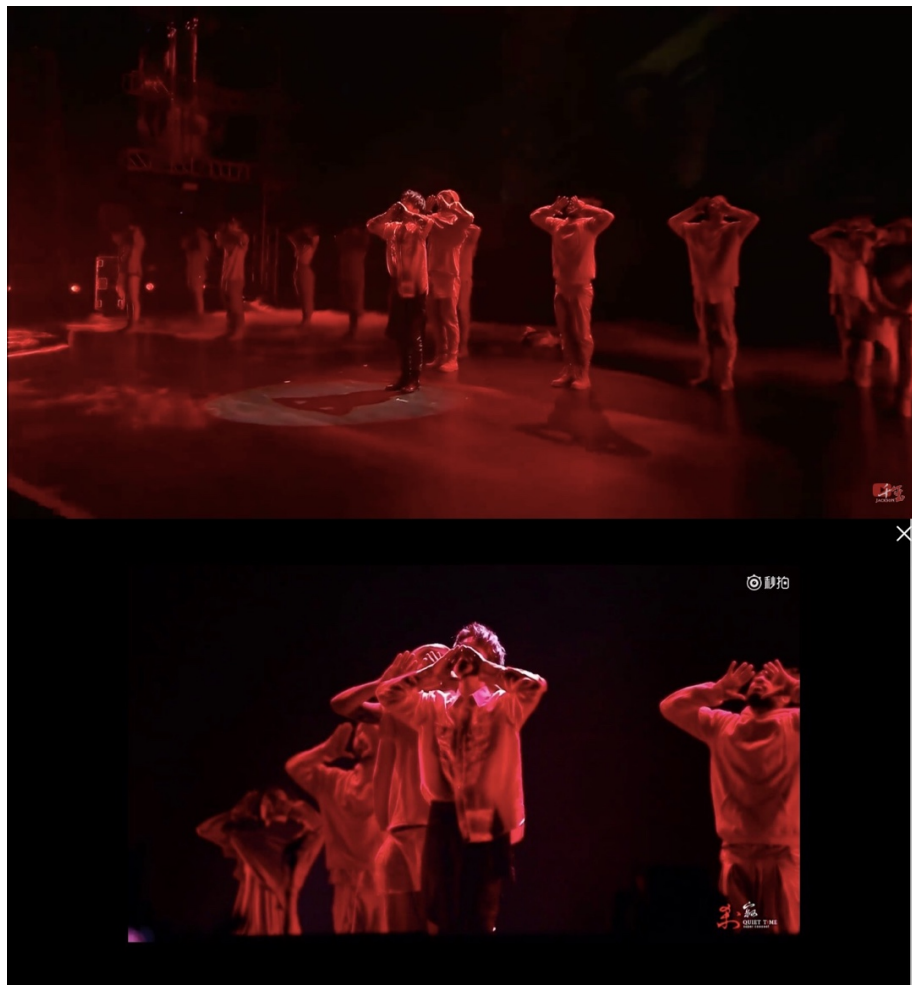


P1. Fans add a new visual effect with characters and a different background music ¹

P1 is a typical example that fans use multiple codes such as visual effects and slogans to illustrate a connotation that of Yi's image full of strength and charm inside the fan groups and the emotional narrative of fans towards him.

Good. I like where this is going, but how do you argue these things? What examples do you have from other studies to support your interpretation?

Another distinct feature of the fan-made videos is the different camera angles, which can be seen as a change in the narrative structure from the perspective of narrative analysis. P2 shows the camera differences of one movement from Yi's dance.



P2. Two cuts of one scene from the original version (above) and the fan-made video ²

It is apparent that fans tend to use more close shots while the original version chooses to use long shots or full shots. The camera angle here can be seen as the fans' gaze which Good reading for depth, but what does it mean and how do you "know?" represents a connotation to gain a much more closed position to their idols, as well as showing their autonomy in the new fandom culture.

At the same time, new media technological methods have made this form of fan's participatory expression much more accessible.

F2. The ordinary fans, not producing, also take part in the participatory fan activities, by showing their preference for fan-made products on social media platforms. P3 and 4 show some comments gathered from the fan page on Weibo.



P3. Fans appreciating the editing method and the artistic value of the fan-made video ³



P4. Fans claiming that the fan-made video is better than the original version ⁴

Translation of these texts for readers is important. How does one who can't read this know what's going on?

From the discourses of fans such as Da call (cheer for someone), this kind of preference can be seen as an essential way of linkage to form the online fan community. Apart from the official products, fans hold a sense of trust on their fan sites and the runners of the sites, which also reveal the change of power-relationship between fans and the official. Besides, the official side also chooses the fan-made video of Yi as a promotion method for the show.

F3. Participatory behaviours of fans also show a feature of Yangcheng Xi idol, (a Japanese term that means fostered idols, who usually debut at the age of boy or girl, and not very talented at the beginning of their careers. Fans witness the process of their growing up, becoming better performers.) P5 is a cut of typical fan-made magazines

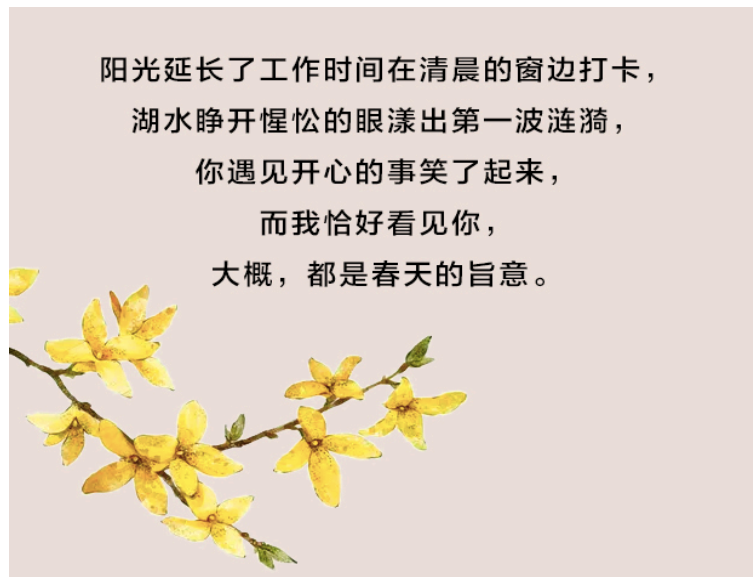
that connotes the feature of Yancheng, by putting Yi's photo of different ages to convey a sense of accompanying the idol.



P5. Fans collecting Yi's photos of different periods to show him growing up ⁵

Meanwhile, from the narratives of such fan-made magazines, it is demonstrated that the you mention narratives frequently. How is this operationalized? What does it mean?

feature of foster is not only related to the collective emotional experience of a fan community but also associated with the self-narrative of fans as individuals. P6 serves as an essential example.



P6. Fans describing their relationship with Yi in a romantic way ⁶

Fans write their own stories to build a romantic narrative with Yi, which defines their encounter as coincidental and poetic through a metaphor of the spring and smiles. This kind of emotional narrative draws a sympathetic experience from other fans and can be strengthened through visual representations on the new media platforms.

Discussion

With the theoretical approaches and research findings in mind, this section is intended to answer the research questions we have raised before.

Considering the roles of new media technologies in fans' online activities, it brings the feature of 'productive audience' (Artieri, 2012) to today's Chinese fandom. For example, the open online platforms such as Weibo have created much more accessibility to both the media content and a large group of fans to form the communication between fans. The video and photo editing applications also allow fans to perform their self-expression and creativity, at the same time change the meanings of the media content. Thus, fans have changed their position from mere consumers to producers, and this transformation meets the main characteristic of 'productive audience' according to Aertieri (2012). We conclude that new media technologies function as the basis for the participatory behaviors of fans, and we also captured the characteristics of 'convergence culture' (Thorburn, Jenkins & Seawell, 2003), where fans engage in the process of transmedia storytelling, by observing the negotiation between fans and such media platforms.

In the meantime, considering the potential of fans participatory behaviors, a particular 'empowerment' of fans can be captured through from F2, which is changing the power structure of producers and consumers, too. The empowerment is not only

instrumentally established by new media technologies as scholarship has demonstrated (Jung & Shim, 2014). In fact, it is also empowered by other fans in the fan groups, which is shown in the online comments on fan-made texts that we have collected. The empowerment makes the official producers no longer the only controller of the industry, at least in the sense of fans' reaction. From our observation, the mainstream media and entertainment agencies start to notice the influence of fan sites and co-operate with fan site runners. By temporarily demising the control of meaning producing, such as Sentence beginning "By temporarily" is a bit confusing. copyright, or setting projects to invited fans' creativity, the official producers show their expect to gain more online participation to demonstrate the commercial value of their products. At the same time, the bottom-up collaboration of fans (Jung & Shim, 2014), which is the connection between fan sites and ordinary fans here, shows their preference on the consumption of cultural products to maintain their ideal images of the idol inside. This preference is in line with the notion of lobbying (Jenkins 1992; 2006), and online media platforms have made the process of lobbying much more visible than before.

Nevertheless, the limitation of the empowerment cannot be ignored. For example, the

productive activities of fans serve as a resource of intellectual labor, which is out of fans' passion, however, is indeed utilized as the free labor of the entertainment agencies, which is in line with the logic of capital. Thus, the power-relationship between the fans and the entertainment agencies is still not equal. At the same time, the activities of fans in Chinese online media occur mainly in the field of entertainment. Although it indeed shows the feature of participatory culture such as communication, creativity, and personal storytelling, here in our research is not enough data to connect this form of empowerment to other themes of participatory culture such as civic power (Bennett, 2014).

Besides, the emotional self-narrative of the fans should also be considered to understand the performance of fans identities and online communities. Although it has not been one of our research goals, this approach is necessary to theorize the fans' motivation in participating such productive works.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study has first provided some background information on the fandom culture in China and then explore the field more deeply through constructing the theoretical framework in the literature review. By borrowing the concepts of participatory culture, we have conducted a textual and visual analysis of media products made by TFBoys fans that we collected from social media. After a critical analysis and discussion, we suggest that new media technologies not only offer fans with available instruments to express and create their products but also provide them a free space to interact, exchange and collaborate with mainstream media.

Moreover, we find the feature of participatory behaviors from fans' online activities. The potentials of such participatory behaviors have changed the positions of Chinese fans from consumers to producers and generated particular empowerment in the online fan communities. This research is expected to obtain a preliminary view of Chinese fandom and participatory culture but there are still some limitations within this project such as the scale of sample size and limited time period. Nonetheless, we

suggest that this study opens more possibility and sheds light on further exploration in this field.

Could you have said more about the virtue of these means of analysis, these methods?

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¹Screenshot from the fan-made video of the dance *belief*, post by Shaji.

²Above: screenshot from the official video of the dance *belief*, post by Jackson Yee Channel; below:
Screenshot from the fan-made video of the dance *belief*, post by Shaji.

³Screenshot of comments on the fan-made video of the dance *belief*.

⁴Screenshot of comments on the fan-made video of the dance *belief*.

⁵Screenshot of the fan-magazine *Memory of Jackson* vol.156, post by Memory-of-Jackson

⁶Screenshot of the fan-magazine *Memory of Jackson* vol.156, post by Memory-of-Jackson