

Conceptualizing Populism: A Comparative Study Between China and Liberal Democratic Countries

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This article analyzes the study of populism in China, highlighting its dynamics and features. Compared with abundant studies of populism in democratic countries, populism in China remains underexplored by non-Chinese scholars, and the contributions of Chinese scholarship are largely unknown outside China. To address this gap, this article reviews the state of the art of Chinese scholarship on populism, bringing it into conversation with the wider body of literature. From its analysis, two distinct types of populism are identified within Chinese research: *classical communist populism* and *bottom-up populism*. The former is advanced via official channels, through state promotion of the identity, wisdom, and revolutionary potential of the people. The latter is located in the antagonism between the “pure people” and “corrupt elites,” primarily through an online, bottom-up dynamic. We argue that *bottom-up populism* can also be conceptualized as “online populism,” as a manifestation of populism found in grassroots discourses targeting certain societal elites in online space.

Keywords: populism, China, meta review, online populism, grassroots discourse

The world has witnessed a wave of populism in recent years, and with it research on populism has also boomed. Scholars have explored populism as a phenomenon arising in a number of democratic regions, including Latin America (de la Torre, 2007), the United States (Lowndes, 2017), Western Europe (Taggart, 1995), Africa (Resnick, 2010), and East Asia (Hellmann, 2017). However, moving beyond these democratic contexts and turning to the case of China, little research has been published in English on populist dynamics in China (cf. Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, & Ostiguy, 2017). Studies of populism in China that have been published in English have primarily explored populist nationalism (Xu, 2001), populist instruments of social governance (M. Miao, 2013), digital populism (Tai, 2015), online discourses of populism (Y. Miao, 2020), and struggles for citizenship rights “from below” (Schröder, 2020, p. 1). However, a large body of works on populism has been published in Chinese. Because this research remains largely unknown to populism scholars internationally, this article shows where the inclusion of this scholarship in the wider discussion of populism benefits our understanding of this global phenomenon. To bridge these bodies of work, we offer a distinctive

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understanding of populism research focusing on its rise within an authoritarian regime, departing from the primary focus of research that tracks populism's rise in democratic contexts.

This calls for expanding how we think about populism. The sociopolitical environment in China is distinct from liberal democratic countries, especially regarding freedom of expression, the electoral system, and opportunities for political engagement. Thus, any discussion of populism in China needs to focus on its distinct characteristics. By exploring how Chinese scholars conceptualize populism, we identify how Chinese definitions differ from those in democratic countries. This article first reviews studies of populism in the West and brings these into conversation with a systematic analysis of populism research in China. We then present a conceptual framework categorizing Chinese populism scholarship as theoretical, historical, and contemporary. Finally, we compare the conceptual approaches employed by scholars studying populism in democratic countries with those applied in China.

Conceptual Approaches to Populism

Populism is a highly contested concept. It has been conceptualized and characterized differently across specific traditions, regions, and archetypes, leading to academic debates developing "in a relatively staggered and disjointed manner" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 17). In reviewing the breadth of populism studies, we identify seven conceptual approaches: ideational (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), political-strategic (Weyland, 2001, 2017), sociocultural (Ostiguy, 2017), discursive (Hawkins, 2009; Laclau, 2005; Wodak, 2003), political style (Moffitt, 2016), collective action (Aslanidis, 2017), and critical theory approaches to populism (Abromeit, 2017; Rensmann, 2018). However, with little shared common ground, a unified definition of populism remains elusive (Mudde, 2004). To unpack these inconsistencies, the following sections outline these different strands of research.

Populism as Ideology

The ideational approach argues that populism should be defined as an ideology or worldview (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This approach is derived from the work of Shils (1956), who argued populism "exists wherever there is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly of power, property, breeding and culture" (pp. 100–101). For Shils, the key to understanding populism lies in the relationship between a society's elite and its people, with elite-dominated institutions being blamed and portrayed as betraying and no longer representing the will of the people. However, even when seen as an ideology, populism is often distinguished from traditional "thick" ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, or nationalism, more often being referred to as a "thin-centered" ideology (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). This approach sees societies where populism takes hold as being separated by antagonism between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." Populists, in these contexts, argue "politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

Despite the merits of the ideational approach (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), there are potential perils with identifying populism as a thin-centered ideology. The primary issue concerns the term "ideology," which, like populism, is a contested concept. Defining a contested concept based on another contested concept increases the chances of misunderstanding (MacRae, 1969). There is also a risk of rendering populism "so thin

(as) to lose its conceptual validity and usefulness" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 19). Finally, studies often intertwine populism as a thin-centered ideology with other (thick) ideologies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), making it difficult to distinguish populism as such.

Populism as Political Strategy

The political-strategic approach, based on studies of political figures in Latin America, defines populism as a political strategy that a charismatic leader applies to mobilize an otherwise unorganized mass into followers through a direct, unmediated, and noninstitutionalized connection (Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2001). From this perspective, the cornerstone to understanding populism lies in understanding the role of a charismatic leader or a party who wins and exercises power (Luther, 2011), bringing "the people" together on a symbolic level (Moffitt, 2016). However, "the people" do not have specific agency in the political strategic approach. For example, Weyland (2017) depicts them as an "amorphous, heterogeneous, and largely unorganized" (p. 54) mass of followers subordinated to charismatic leaders. As outsider challengers speaking in the name of the people, these leaders may win short-term elections by applying specific strategies; however, once in power they often lose the support of "the people" due to their unsophisticated approaches to politics. Underestimating "the people" in the political strategic approach leaves open questions. Although this approach works well for understanding how populist leaders mobilize mass followers, and how they lose sway over their followers once in power, it does not fully account for the role of the people themselves in these dynamics (Moffitt, 2016).

Populism as a Sociocultural Phenomenon

The sociocultural approach addresses a shortcoming in the ideational and political strategic approaches, emphasizing "a dynamic cultural-relational approach to populism in politics" (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 92). It adopts a sociological perspective, emphasizing the ways of being or doing politics, focusing on the "communicational, rhetorical, self-presentational and body-behavior style" (Brubaker, 2017, p. 366) of politicians (Moffitt, 2016). Ostiguy (2017) distinguishes between "high" and "low" aspects of populism, classifying populists' ways of relating to people and making decisions in either cruder or more refined manners (p. 80). Plotting these in terms of populists' social-cultural and political-cultural aspects, Ostiguy labels populists' manners, speaking style, tastes and dress as "high" when they are relatively rich, well-educated, and well-mannered, and "low" if they are uninhibited in public or cater to the language, taste, identity, and values of the mass public. The "low" style is enacted through the body, "since the body is a potent political operator and signifier, proximity to 'the people' can be communicated and performed through gesture, tone, sexuality, dress, and food" (Brubaker, 2017, p. 367). This is also the case for political-cultural components, where populists ranked higher prefer implementing power in an institutionalized, impersonal, mediated, formal and procedural manner while politicians plotted lower are inclined to execute power in relatively unmediated, personalistic, uninstitutionalized, and direct ways. Like the political-strategic strand, this approach tends to understand populism through the features of populist leaders, rather than the people said to be represented.

Populism as Discourse

Research approaching populism as a discourse examines where populists identify "good with a unified will of the people" separate from "evil with a conspiring elite" (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1042). Laclau (2005) has made

this approach prominent. Influenced by his use of linguistics and mass psychology, scholars with the Essex School developed quantitative content-oriented methods to measure levels of populism (Hawkins, 2009; Pauwels, 2011). Hawkins (2009) created a measurement that attempts to scale the "level" of populism, analyzing the use of language and text over time and across space, whereas Pauwels (2011) adopted computer-based quantitative content analysis to measure populist discourses. The Essex School's research allows political actors to be understood as "more or less" populist through a populism-as-discourse approach that reveals "the gradational quality of populism" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 22). However, it struggles in explaining elements beyond language, including performative and aesthetic elements.

Populism as a Political Style

Many scholars (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt, 2016) have conceived of populism as a political performative style. This approach shifts from focusing on (discursive) appeals to the people toward understanding the ways these appeals are shaped and delivered. Moffitt (2016) emphasizes mediated performative aspects of populism by building a concept of political style that combines rhetoric with delivery modes and aesthetics. He argues that populism can be understood through everyday symbolically mediated performances that are used to obtain political and governing power. Moffitt goes on to define populism "as a political style that features an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners' and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat" (p. 45). Attempting to move beyond the limits of recent definitional approaches to populism, he works to address populism as a truly global phenomenon, identifying 28 populist leaders around the world through case studies. For Moffitt, these figures "ultimately 'do' populism" (p. 51).

The advantage of this approach, Moffitt (2016) argues, is that it enables the interpretation of populism across ideological spectra and contexts. Furthermore, it fills the "empty heart" (Taggart, 2004, p. 280), "empty shell" (Mény & Surel, 2002, p. 6), or "thin centered ideology" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6) of populism with "substance" (Castañeda, 2006, p. 36). However, the political style approach remains broad, without clear delimitation (Weyland, 2001). Critics such as Abromeit (2017) argue Moffitt's approach overly focuses on mediated performances rather than on "the larger social and historical context in which those performances occur" (p. 4).

Populism as Social Movement

Because most populism research focuses on populist leaders or populist parties within elections-based systems, research on populism beyond institutional structures remains limited. Among those who have considered populism beyond these structures, Laclau (2005) has approached it as a social movement, offering a framework to explore the ways in which collective grassroots movements are assembled discursively. Similarly, Aslanidis (2017) focuses on the microsociological level to restore the balance between studying political parties or leaders and studying grassroots social movements. He addresses the mobilizing potential of social movements and their populist discourses through a collective action master frame, aimed at "triggering a cognitive process that transforms discontent into action" (Aslanidis, 2017, p. 310). Here, populist discourses collectively and imaginatively evoke the grievances and discontent of the people, poised against corrupt elites or an unjust system (Williams, 2013), mobilizing the audiences to seek change through action. Conceptualizing populism as a collective action master frame is derived from studies of social movements in democratic

countries. However, it remains unexplored whether this approach can be applied to authoritarian regimes absent such opportunities for democratic action, such as in China, where off-line collective actions are curtailed under strict governmental supervision.

Critical Theory to Populism

Adding to the aforementioned definitional approaches, other scholars (Abromeit, 2017; Rensmann, 2018) argue for a return to early Frankfurt School critical theory to study contemporary populism, and authoritarian varieties of populism in particular. Abromeit (2017) explores the pertinence of the Frankfurt School's work on authoritarian populism. He suggests revisiting the 1930s theoretical work of Horkheimer and Fromm, who focused on the relationship between capitalist crises and authoritarian populist movements, to understand populism now. Rensmann (2018) draws on the work of Löwenthal (1987) and Adorno and colleagues (1950), focusing on the characteristics, techniques and psychological appeal of authoritarian populist leaders, alongside properties of authoritarian governance, to reconstruct the techniques and psychosocial elements of far-right populist movements into a unified framework.

Expanding Populism Research to the Chinese Context

As the previous overview outlines, research on populism in Western and Latin-American contexts dominates our understanding of the phenomenon. Conceptually, populism has been largely defined through analysis of leaders, parties, or movements who serve as "the mediated leader" of populist movements. This results in an understanding of populism working from the top-down, focusing on charismatic leaders who, through election successes and movement visibility, represent dynamics of populism. However, the rise of populism in nondemocratic systems necessarily differs. Here it emerges without an explicitly identifiable charismatic leader to be elected or the potential for a movement to reshape politics. In the following sections, we argue an alternative, bottom-up approach to populism can be identified in systems without explicit or electable charismatic leadership figures. This expands our understanding of this phenomenon and, by examining how Chinese scholars define populism, we can identify where approaches within nondemocratic systems differ from approaches from the liberal democratic contexts.

What becomes clear below is a Chinese *Sonderweg* to populism, due both to the absence of an electable "leader figure" and to the coexistence of classical communist populism and bottom-up online populism. The analysis below shows how specific Chinese understandings of this phenomenon that enhance our understanding of populism overall. Therefore, a comparison of these disparate understandings needs to be drawn to identify what each contributes to the other.

Methods: Assessing Populism Research in China

We used four selection criteria to identify articles that are relevant to assess the state of research on populism in China. The CNKI database (知网, *zhiwang*), which provides the largest electronic collection of full-text research articles across disciplines, was used to collect our sample (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Selection Procedures and Criteria Applied.

Phase	Process	Result
Step 1	Keyword search: 民粹 (mincui)	914 articles
Step 2	Citation index check: Narrow to articles indexed in CSSCI	357 articles
Step 3	Inclusion criteria applied: Focused on populism in mainland China, or discussed theories on populism in general and related to the nature of Chinese populism Exclusion criteria applied: Excluded all articles that addressed populism outside mainland China	160 articles
Step 4	Final check: Do these articles reflected the state of the art of Chinese populism research based on citation figures?	161 articles (Final sample)

First, we limited our analysis to full-length articles that included “民粹” (*mincui*, “populism”) in titles. This search term was chosen as it is the root word for the breadth of possible terms being used to study populism. Both “民粹” (*mincui*) and “民粹主义” (*mincui zhuyi*) mean “populism” in Chinese, and similar terms, including “民粹主义领袖” (*mincui zhuyi lingxiu*), meaning “populist leader,” and “民粹主义政党” (*mincui zhuyi zhengdang*), meaning populist party, also include the root “民粹” (*mincui*). A potential limitation of searching only in the title is that it excludes articles with the root “民粹” (*mincui*) in the abstract and keywords. To mitigate this, we validate our sample in Step 4 using citation figures.

Second, we narrowed the sample to studies indexed by the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI). This is considered one of the most comprehensive and reliable citation indexes in China. Articles published from the founding of the CSSCI (January 1998) until December 2019 were included in our sample and subjected to a preliminary reading where we applied inclusion/exclusion criteria to identify relevant articles. This results in a sample containing all articles that either focus on populism in mainland China or discuss theories on populism in general to relate these to Chinese populism. We excluded all articles that focused solely on populism outside mainland China. This selection process resulted in 160 articles.

As a final check to ensure articles reflected the state of the art of Chinese populism research, we examined citation figures within the sample. This showed that the articles in our sample were also among the most referenced and discussed in the field, with one exception. Within our sample, the most cited article was “Populism in the Process of Modernization” (Yu, 1997), published in *Strategy and Management* before the formation of the CSSCI. This was the only article among the 20 most-cited articles that was not captured in our initial search. To do justice to its influence, this article was added to our sample.

Following sampling, we proceeded with two rounds of coding, starting with a first round of close reading and open inductive coding. During this first step, two layers of codes were applied. The first layer identified whether an article offered a case study or non-case-study approach, and whether the study addressed populism before or after 1990 (within the literature, 1990 is widely regarded as the beginning of the third wave of populism; Kaltwasser et al., 2017). The second layer focused on grouping articles into thematic categories. In this step, themes emerged from a close reading of the articles categorized within first-layer codes. Beginning with non-case-study research, studies that focused on definitions and features of populism were categorized as

theoretical discussions. Articles that focused on the impact of populism on democracy or socialist democracy were categorized as *populism and democracy*. Where causal reasons to populism and its spread were highlighted, articles were categorized as *cause and globalization of populism*.

Studies of cases of populism from before 1990 were categorized into one of two themes. Research that focused on a debate over whether Maoism could be seen as populism were categorized as *Maoism or populism*, whereas studies that focused on how early Russian populism might have influenced China's social movements were categorized as *populism before 1949*.

Finally, research addressing post-1990 case studies were categorized under one of three themes. Discussions that linked the rise of the populism to increased Internet access were categorized as *online populism*. Studies that focused on populism as a challenge to the societal status quo, and the response to its rise, were categorized as *populism and social governance*. Finally, studies addressing the populist response to cultural rifts, such as reactions to elite culture, were categorized as *cultural populism*.

In the second round of analysis, a more focused coding was performed, allowing us to subsume these eight categories under three umbrella categories: *theoretical populism*, *historical populism* and *contemporary populism*. By doing so, the commonalities between the contributions these studies have made to understanding populism across time periods and cases were emphasized. In the following sections, we will elaborate on these categorizations to unpack how populism research in China expands our understanding of how they are related to a wider understanding of populism (see Figure 1).

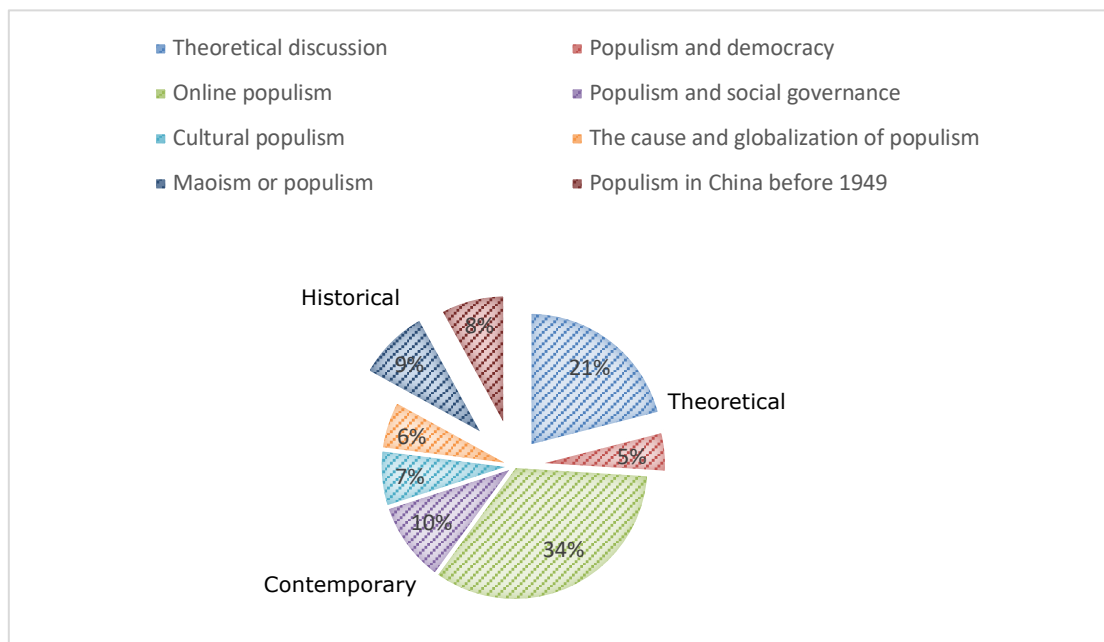


Figure 1. Themes of populism research in China.

Theoretical Populism

Theoretical studies of populism account for 26% of the total sample. This research shows the impact of the sociopolitical environment on defining and understanding populism. In liberal democratic societies, charismatic leaders can mobilize people to win, gain, and maintain political power through political elections and movements. However, in China's hierarchical electoral system, political leaders are indirectly selected by the People's Congress, rather than directly by the public. Individual citizens are limited to participating in political elections at the village or community level, where they can elect their representatives to higher levels of government. This political system is alternatively called a "socialist democracy" in China (Jiang, 2014, p. 109), or, particularly in Western scholarship, an authoritarian regime (Perry, 2015).

The conceptualization of populism as an ideology dominates within theoretical discussions. For example, in the most cited article, Yu (1997) synthesizes populism as a "super-ideology," emphasizing the values and ideas of the common people who possess decisive power, arguing that as a super-ideology, populism "can be painted onto any other ideologies and on completely different political systems" (p. 95). Tong (2017) defines populism as an ideology, offering a binary distinction between a "subjective logic" ("主体逻辑," *zhuti luoji*, p. 10) and a "programmatically arrangement" ("程序安排," *chengxu anpai*, p. 15). "Subjective logic" emphasizes the collective identity, values, and culture of the people, arguing that the interest of the people should come before political interests (pp. 10–15). "Programmatically arrangement" challenges the political system as no longer representing the general will of the people, advocating a direct governing from the people (pp. 15–22). Z. J. Guo (2019), alternatively, suggests reconceptualizing populism using a two-tier model, separating "political values" ("价值观," *jiazhi guan*) and "empirical phenomena" ("经验现象," *jingyan xianxiang*, p. 153). In terms of political values, populism is opposite elitism. It advocates the identity and values of the normal people and those at the bottom of the society. As "empirical phenomenon," Z. J. Guo (2019) mentions "various populism phenomena manifested in history, such as populism parties, populism politicians, and populism strategies" (p. 156).

Compared with Western studies of populism, there is an obvious absence of antiestablishment and "people versus elite" rhetoric in studies of populism from Chinese scholars. Populist appeals to revolt against the elite-dominated establishment (as seen elsewhere) would equate to challenging the governing power of Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Within an authoritarian regime, emerging charismatic populist leaders who could potentially represent the people would take on significant threats. Not only does China's state structure preclude the rise of charismatic leaders, there is also a high personal risk: a Chinese proverb warns that "枪打出头鸟" (*Qiang da chu tou niao*; "the gun shoots the bird whose neck reaches out first").

For scholars, this means that within China's hierarchical and nontransparent procedures, populism cannot be located in efforts to gain political power by charismatic leaders appealing to an electorate. Scholars approach this dynamic by exploring the game models of collective action in China. S. L. Guo and Tong (2013) argue that because of the government's strategy of "shooting the bird" (p. 23), organizers of collective activities face high risks, and potential charismatic leaders change their behavior. This strategy provides a warning to the public, reminding them to be a member of a silent majority rather than a charismatic leader (S. L. Guo & Tong, 2013, p. 23). Alternatively, we found discourses around populism that

emphasize the identity, value, culture, and centrality of “the people” (Z. J. Guo, 2019; Tong, 2017; Yu, 1997), resonating with classical communist populism which is outlined in the following section.

Historical Populism

Historical studies of populism account for 17% of the sample. They primarily focus on populist tendencies in social movements and among early revolutionaries (e.g., Sun Yat-sen, Mao Tse-tung). Scholars working in this area argue populism in China followed the Russian tradition, emphasizing the power of workers and peasants. They argue that Russian populism spread in China as an ideology, often combined with anarchism, nihilism, and socialism, and that the most important feature during this period was the illusion that China, as an agricultural country, could jump over capitalist industrialization to become a socialist society. This is then reflected in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen (M. N. Chen, 2002), and the May 4th Movement (Zuo, 2010).

Whether Maoism can be treated as populism was a prominent debate among scholars in the early 2000s (S. L. Wang, 2006; Zhang, 2013; P. Z. Zhao, 2003). Influenced by populist movements in Russia, this debate built on Townsend’s (1977) research, which found that ordinary people, especially workers and peasants, gained significant power in the construction of Chinese political and social life during the revolutionary era. Maoism conceives of ordinary people as an organic and “united political entity with enormous revolutionary potentialities” (Meisner, 1971, p. 17). In Chinese populism scholarship, three arguments link Maoism to populism: Mass Line political theory (Zhang, 2013), an unmediated institutional governing system (S. L. Wang, 2006), and an egalitarian social relationship (P. Z. Zhao, 2003).

The Mass Line refers to how Mao Tse-tung highlighted the physically and psychologically close relationship between the CCP and the masses. This is understood as both an organizational strategy and a leadership tactic. The slogan “from the masses, to the masses” (Korolev, 2017, p. 14) has been developed into a coherent theory to summon officials to work and study among the masses, learn from the masses, make policy based on the wisdom of the masses, and finally benefit the masses. In his later years, Mao supported the implementation of the Mass Line as an organizational form through mass campaigns and a decentralized institutional system. Studies focus on how large-scale campaigns led people to revolt against the established bureaucracy, reject routine administration, and build a direct unmediated connection with Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s egalitarianism is regarded as the third contribution to Chinese populism, as an effort to build an economically and politically equal society. Although some scholars (S. L. Wang, 2006; Zhang, 2013) regard Mao as a revolutionary, others (P. Z. Zhao, 2003) treat him as a populist or at least as having populist characteristics. No agreement was reached in this debate, and it faded away in the late 2000s when scholars’ attention turned to online populism.

Recently, however, China witnessed a revival of Maoism when Xi Jinping came into power, launching a major ideological, anticorruption, and Mass Line Education and Practice campaign. Its aim is to strengthen and legitimize the leadership of the CCP, discipline the CCP, reinforce its grip on power, maintain social stability and achieve China’s populist dream of national rejuvenation (Perry, 2015; S. Zhao, 2016). Theoretically, the Mass Line campaign is aimed at better representing social groups “who fail to articulate their needs through the existing participation mechanisms and who therefore remain outside of the policy-

making process" (Korolev, 2017, p. 7). Although the Mass Line campaign increased formal channels for political participation and expression, in the next theme we see how scholars see this reflected in the emergence of online populist appeals. Online, expressions of discontent initiated from the grassroots level grow alongside other understandings of populism in the context of China.

Contemporary Online Populism

With 57% of the sample, research on online populism in contemporary China is the dominant research theme. This first reflects a transformation from focusing on the communist approach, centered on the power of the populace, toward a more Western approach, which highlights antagonism between the people and corrupt elites. Second, it reflects the rise of the Internet and processes of modernization and globalization, resulting in the popularity of "anti-" cultures, which are considered threats to China's social and political stability.

Scholars closely link the rise of populism in contemporary China to the expansion of Internet access (Ma, 2015). According to the *47th China Statistical Report on Internet Development* (Office of Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, Cyberspace Administration of China, 2021), the number of Internet users increased from 620,000 in 1997, to 989 million in December 2020. Although conventional media in China are under a systematic and consistent censorship regime, more open online spaces provide Chinese people with unprecedented access to platforms on which they are able to generate content relatively anonymously, promoting potential political participation and expression. Globally, the online environment "has become a hybrid space in which various actors engage with each other in different ways and as a consequence new power structures are established" (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019, p. 195). This is also the case in China, where research shows people are able to express their dissatisfaction toward certain societal elites and established institutions online, embracing populist inclinations from a grassroots level. However, this form of populist expression targets individual transgressions by certain officials or individual elites, rather than the more general antiestablishment manifestations addressed in Western research.

These phenomena are conceptualized by Chinese scholars as online populism. This term quickly gained traction among scholars of populism in China in the first decades of the 21st century. Online populism has been defined through concepts of reflection, transference, extension, and techno-social interaction (Liu, 2016). The first approach sees online populism as a virtual reflection of real life, particularly in terms of social inequality and injustice. In this understanding, no distinction is made between online populism and populism in general (L. Chen, 2011). Transference describes scenarios where people transfer their feelings of discontent to online spaces, because off-line expression channels are blocked. The transference argument is also known as the functional approach, whereby "the Internet provides an excellent platform for populism" and "digital media fuel the spread of online populism" (Li & Xu, 2012, p. 26). Thirdly, extension views online populism, on the one hand, as a rebellion against elitism in real life, and on the other, as an extension of off-line populism (Tao, 2009). Finally, the techno-social interaction viewpoint, proposed by Liu (2016), emphasizes the role of technology in understanding populism. It argues that online populism is itself a new form of populism with new properties, including "human flesh search" (人肉搜索, *renrou sousuo*) and "symbolic carnival" (符号狂欢, *fuhao kuanghuan*; Liu, 2016, p. 61). "Human flesh search," akin to doxing, is a malicious activity involving searching for and publishing personal information about individuals or subjects online, often done collaboratively, by multiple users (Pan, 2010, p. 2). As a collective action, "human flesh search" normally targets specific privileged

individuals, including corrupt officials or economic elites, rather than the elite-class or established-institutions as a whole (Liu, 2017). "Symbolic carnival" (Fei, 2016, p. 34) refers to online discussions which feature symbolic representations of individual viewpoints, such as words or memes, as a way to reflect discontent.

However, these approaches do not fully explain collaborative connective activities. The Internet, instead of providing an ideal digitally mediated "public sphere" where people can voice their views and concerns, has instead increased ideological segregation between opposing views. It also does not resolve differences between seeing online activities as expressions "the people" writ large, or more narrowly as those of outspoken "netizens" who, as hyperusers of the online environment, could present a distorted view of their activities as representative of the general will of the people.

In other work, online populism is described in terms of discourses (L. Chen, 2011; X. A. Guo & Zhu, 2015), social movements (Y. Chen, 2011), and collective actions (Fei, 2016). L. Chen (2011), for example, conceptualizes online populism as a grassroots discourse directed against the elite. To influence public opinion, populists use discourse strategies such as "imposing upon the charges, spreading false news, vituperating, romancing the events and so on" to "take the vantage place" (L. Chen, 2011, p. 16) of discourse. In contrast, Y. Chen (2011) regards online populism as virtual social movements. Because off-line expression is subject to strict censorship, (semi-)anonymous virtual networks provide a more open space for people to express their discontent and appeals for action. People gather in virtual social movements by, collectively, making the same appeal or expressing the same discontent. Others, such as Fei (2016), regard online populism as online collective action, arguing that populists' online actions operate under three mechanisms. First, these actions can trigger sympathy among the people by distinguishing the pure "us" from the corrupt "others." Second, they challenge the legitimacy of elites and established society through a grassroots discursive "carnival" (Fei, 2016, p. 33). Third, they polarize social groups and usurp discursive power by spreading fake news, using violent language, and oppressing opposing viewpoints. Many researchers have applied these approaches to explore online populism's causes (Ma, 2015; Yu, 2017) and effects (Li & Xu, 2012), and regard online populism as a threat to the stability of society (Hao, 2019). As a result, a discussion of online governance emerges alongside discussions of online populism in these studies.

Contemporary research also conceptualizes populism as emotional politics (e.g., politically antiofficial, economically antirich, and culturally antielite), which threatens social governance and against which measures should be taken to counteract its negative effects (Hao, 2019). Populist revolutions against the political status quo are regarded as threats to traditional social governance. Because these challenge policy-making procedures, question the legitimacy of penal policy of the current system, and ask for public participation in a fair and just system of decision making. This leads to an imbalance among social interest groups, including between the local governments and its citizens. Scholars link this imbalance to a way of conceiving of populism as it manifests in protests, for example against PX (p-Xylene) production programs (Feng, 2015).

Scholars mostly agree that the polarization of social groups and the unjust and unfair distribution of social resources are fundamental causes of online, bottom-up populism (Y. Chen, 2011). Compounding this, the popularity and (semi-) anonymous features of digital media platforms allow individuals to vent their grievances, appeal, mobilize, and protest from a grassroots level (Ma, 2015; Yu, 2017). To maintain social stability, scholars identify where the government should take the (populist) interests of people into consideration and improve

decision-making procedures (Feng, 2015). However, they also argue that populists' arguments concerning "public opinion to the highest" and "extremism egalitarianism in distribution" (L. X. Wang, 2016, p. 28) are often expressed in an irrational way, exacerbating the polarization of social groups and impeding social development. Populists' "anti-" culture, particularly among adolescent college students, are described in this scholarship as threatening social stability as younger generations influenced by populist ideology act radically, speak violently, and protest collectively, all with irrational emotion (Liu, 2017).

The final topic under the umbrella of contemporary populism is populist tendencies in mass culture. Here, scholars focus on examining characteristics, representations, and challenges to elite culture. Anti-intellectualism is an important feature of this vein of cultural populism. This is the case when people push back against elites' knowledge as misreading the masses, thereby weakening the authority of intellectuals (W. Q. Chen, 2014). Anti-intellectualism in cultural populism manifests in efforts to reduce barriers for mass participation in cultural production, highlighting the taste and value of the masses through parody and satire. Parody (*e'gao*, 恶搞), which "puts social conventions on display for collective reflection" (Hariman, 2008, p. 251), is the main form of cultural protest against elites, targeting elites' identities, values, and taste through language parody and farcical imitation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The differences between the sociopolitical contexts in liberal democracies and in China have a major influence on how scholars approach, identify, and study populism. Our analysis shows that scholars in China rarely adopt the same conceptual approaches to analyzing populism as found in studies centered on populism in the West, including in studies where they link their research to global context. Nevertheless, there is some agreement on conceptualizing populism as an ideology, a discourse, or a social movement.

Overall, Chinese research on populism deviates from Western scholarship by conceptualizing populism as a bottom-up instead of a top-down phenomenon. This is closely related to the political structures of the countries in which scholars study populism. In liberal democratic countries, charismatic leaders and movements are central to populism studies. They are the "representative figureheads" who mediate between the people and elites, positioning themselves as speaking on behalf of "the people" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 52). Populism is conceptualized along the lines of populists' leaders adopting an ideology, a political strategy, a political style, a discourse, or being described in terms of a sociocultural phenomenon. Because of the absence of (potentially) electable charismatic leaders, populism research necessarily follows a different path in China.

In terms of defining populism as an ideology, scholars in democratic countries place emphasis on the antagonism between the people and the elite, with populists arguing that politics should represent the general will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Shils, 1956). In contrast, Chinese research shows how populism as an ideology focuses on a "subjective logic" (Tong, 2017, p. 10) or on "political values" (Z. J. Guo, 2019, p. 153), and emphasizes the collective identity, values and culture of the people (Yu, 1997). This avoids a broad "people versus elite" and "antiestablishment" narrative, which likely results from key structural differences in China, where any populist anti-establishmentarianism would be seen as equivalent to an anti-CCP rhetoric. However, the studies we analyzed show that populism in China nevertheless can be

conceptualized as targeting *specific* corrupt elites, officials, or local governments seen as working against the people, rather than the overall elite class, established institutions, or central government.

The difference in assessing discursive approaches to populism between those employed in China and in liberal democratic countries can be further unpacked in terms of the actors involved in "doing politics." As Fetzer and Lauerbach (2007) argue, politics can be done "from above," "from media," and "from below" (pp. 4–7). The discursive approach to populism in liberal democratic countries places emphasis on those societal actors "doing politics from above," evidenced by the analysis of the discourse of politicians or party manifestos (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1048; Pauwels, 2011, p. 102). However, in China, scholars focus on decoding the discourse from the grassroots, particularly in comments made on social media platforms and online fora instead (L. Chen, 2011).

Scholars in China also define populism as a social movement (Y. Chen, 2011) or as a form of collective action (Fei, 2016), as researchers have done in the West (Aslanidis, 2017), though differences exist. Because off-line social movements and off-line collective actions are often prohibited, populism as a social movement is defined by its virtual and online nature. This results in a new concept of populism identified by scholars in China as *online populism*. Defined as having little or no formal organizational activity, online populism revolves around the coproduction and codistribution of bottom-up populist messages. In this context, populist movements emerge when self-motivated citizens use digital platforms to circulate and share personal ideas, discontent, and populist appeals as a form of action against a corrupt elite actor. The affordances of digital platforms play a distinctive role here, with the organizing characteristic of communication seen on these platforms as a prominent feature of online populism (Sun, Graham, & Broersma, 2020).

Having analyzed the differences between approaches employed by Chinese and Western scholars, we further elaborate on three distinctive features of Chinese populism research. First, populism in China is located in the coexistence of a classical idea of communist populism and a newly emergent bottom-up populism. Classical communist populism initiated in Leninist Russia as an attempt to cultivate a revolutionary consciousness among peasants was later applied in China. The CCP adapted it to conceive of the people as an organic whole in ways that strengthened and legitimated its own power and ruling position (S. L. Wang, 2006; Zhang, 2013). In contrast, bottom-up populism emerges from the grassroots level, and tends to highlight a sense of antagonism between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Liu, 2016, p. 60). It challenges the political status quo by giving people an opportunity to voice discontent, challenging controversial policy-making procedures, and by focusing populist attention on specific revolts against China's corrupt elites (L. Chen, 2011; Li & Xu, 2012). The consequences of these contradictory approaches to populism should be addressed in future research on populism in China.

Second, because of the absence of electable charismatic leaders, populism in China has a bottom-up nature that lacks specific structural outcomes. Western scholarship, differs in this regard as even bottom-up movements are motivated toward achieving regime change by bringing a populist leader into power. However, in China, the hierarchical election system together with the high risks for potential charismatic leaders block the potential for populist movements to emerge in a fashion similar to those in the West (S. L. Guo & Tong, 2013). Without explicit leaders, populism in China remains within this more bottom-up

dynamic, with individual people voicing their discontent online toward specific corrupt elite individuals, rather than the overall state structure.

Third, research on populism in China is mostly focused on online expressions of populism. Scholars have defined online populism in terms of reflection, transference, extension, and techno-social interaction, highlighting its relationship with real-life populism. However, these definitions prove to be insufficient in fully capturing populism's online dynamics. Mostly, there is an unclear connection between online populism as a true expression of the general will of the people, and a more critical view of online populism as collected expression of grievances that are being made by a subset of hyperattuned Internet users. Thus, there is a risk that online populism as a concept is not a reflection of the appeals and discontent of the pure people, but rather a distortion shaped by a subset of actors. This generates new concerns about the limits of our ability to fully describe populism in China under existing frameworks for conceiving of "the people," including the extent to which "netizens" represent the people, and the extent to which public opinion represents the general will of the people. The current definitions of online populism blur these distinctions, resulting in a view that regards online populism as a threat to the social stability.

Further work should address the gaps identified in this study, including how scholars of Chinese populism understand "the people," a core attribute of all populist discussions; how "the people" can be distinguished from an outspoken minority of "netizens" who sway public opinion and trigger emotional outbursts; and whether, in the case of China, the general will can be distinguished from momentary popular opinions. Doing so will help scholars more fully engage with the newly emerging but frequently recurring phenomena of online populism in China.

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