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Introduction
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Over the past two decades, the world has witnessed a global rise of populism (Moffitt, 2016). Whether found in electoral campaigns for populist leaders, or populist movement building among disaffected citizens, over and over we see populism characterized by claims that elite-led systems have betrayed the people, and no longer represent their will (Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2004). In response to the spread of populism, there has also been a proliferation of scholarly work on this phenomenon, seeking to make sense of its rise and spread (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). However, within this scholarship, and when compared with a wealth of research on populism in democratic contexts such as Europe, Latin America, and North America, populism in China remains underexplored, despite the emergence and growth of populist dynamics in the country (Li & Xu, 2012; Schroeder, 2021; Tao, 2009). As Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017) argue in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, "unfortunately, we have not been able to include chapters on populism in China and in the Middle East. This omission is related to the fact that there is little current research on populism about those places" (p.14).

On the one hand, this absence from international discussions of populism is understandable. Part of the reason is that populism is often understood as a “shadow cast by democracy itself” (Canovan, 1999, p.3). Following this argument, it seems antithetical to try and locate populism in a party-state absent these democratic contexts, such as China’s. Furthermore, as a context and research environment that has been cordoned off from wider examination, both language and cultural barriers have presented constraints to international scholars investigating populism in China. Nevertheless, as this PhD study shows, rather than being an un-explored phenomenon in China, many studies on Chinese populism have been conducted by Chinese scholars and published in Chinese journals. This body of work sits alongside scholarship in the West, and thus far has remained largely unknown to international scholars, and has not been subject to the same level of scrutiny as scholarship elsewhere. This underpins one of the overarching aims of this thesis: to bridge these discussions, bringing scholarly work on populism in China into conversation with a wider body of literature in democratic contexts. In
doing so, a further aim of this thesis is advanced. That is, by engaging with the wider body of populism research both in China and beyond, it attempts to move our understanding of populism from West to East, from democratic contexts to a party-state with a communist background, and from offline to online by unraveling the distinct nature of populism, and by providing a specific understanding of how it manifests itself in China.

With these aims in mind, in this introduction the rise of populism is first discussed to help us then situate how populism has developed as a phenomenon in China. This chapter reviews the key concepts shaping our understanding of populism, and in the process it will identify key gaps in knowledge which this PhD study addresses. It will then present the research questions guiding this study, examining how populism can be found beyond the dominant western, democratic contexts where it has been studied, and how populism has emerged as an online bottom-up phenomenon in China. It then outlines how the thesis is organized.

1.1 The global rise of populism

Before turning attention to China, it is worth paying attention to two questions: ‘why populism?’ and ‘why now?’ While populism has a long history, populist leaders and parties have been in recent years particularly successful in establishing footholds in nations and systems that have faced crises ranging from immigration to economic inequalities. In these contexts, we see populists capitalizing on such crises to establish and consolidate their positions as important political forces (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Moffitt, 2015; Stavrakakis, et al., 2018). In Europe, we have seen populists and populist parties gradually moving from marginal positions with little representation in government to mainstream politics. They now hold positions of power in parliaments and governments (Algan, et al., 2017; Wodak, 2020). Populist actors are not only electorally successful, but have also become “mainstreamed and increasingly normalized” (Mudde, 2019, p. 3; Wodak, 2020). Populist leaders have become household names. Politicians including Silvio Berlusconi, Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Geert Wilders grab headlines and maintain media attention, leading their (mainly right-wing) populist parties to more and more successes in the process. For instance, when the leader of the National Front (FN) in France, Jean-Marie Le Pen, ran for the presidency in 2002, he obtained 16.9 percent of the
national vote in the first round and 17.8 percent in the second. This result was easily surpassed by his daughter, Marine Le Pen, when she entered the presidential election in 2017, with 21.3 and 33.9 percent, respectively. Her success continues, in the 2022 presidential election, she won 23.15 and 41.45 percent of votes (BBC News, 2022). Even where their electoral efforts have fallen short, the normalization of populist rhetoric and populist leaders and parties has led to a shift in national and international media attention, with populist agenda items gaining more attention (Ekström et al. 2020). As a result, the rise of right-wing populist parties and politicians has greatly changed the political landscape in European countries. They have put social-culturally embedded issues of immigration, security, corruption, and foreign policy – issues that are central to populist appeal – firmly on the public, political and media agenda. This has been one of the most dramatic changes in European politics in the post-war era (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017).

North America, and specifically the United States, is one of the origin regions of populism. The term populism was first utilized to describe the People’s Party movement in the 1890s in the United States. Farmers in the southern and western parts of the country then protested against the railroad establishment and were hostile to the elites on Wall Street and banks (Taggart, 2000). Populism in the United States later divides into two trends of left-wing and right-wing populism, which become more evident in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While well-known left-wing populists such as the U.S. Senator and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders protest against economic elites in the name of the people, right-wing populists adopted populism as a means to advocate for white supremacy and to promote xenophobia (Lowndes, 2017). Former U.S. president, Donald Trump as one such exemplar of right-wing populism, launched his campaign and oriented his political aims through appeals to white supremacy as a way of appealing to the people (Lowndes, 2017) through a symbolically mediated performance (Moffitt, 2016, p.28-29) of “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy, 2017). In addition to left-wing and right-wing populism that center on populist leaders, there is another type of bottom-up populism in the United States found in protest movements (Aslanidis, 2017). A recent example of this is the Occupy Wall Street movement, which was initiated by grassroots activists as an extralegal action of occupying New York’s
financial district, enacting a notion of the people (the 99%) in an antagonistic relationship with elites (the wealthiest 1%). The motto “we are the 99%” refers to the wealth and income inequality between the wealthiest 1% and the remaining 99% of the population in the United States, echoing the antagonism between the, so-called, pure people and the corrupt elite that typifies populism.

In Latin America, the political landscape has had a long history of populist parties and politicians, playing a role in national and regional politics. This has been one of the focal points of scholars trying to understanding populism’s various threads, and the differences between classical, neoliberal, and radical populism (De la Torre, 2017). Beginning in the 1930s, classical populist leaders, such as Juan Perón in Argentina and José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, mobilized their followers in order to challenge the rules of the ‘corrupt elite’ by bringing marginalized voices and groups into the political community (De la Torre, 2017). Nearing the end of the century, neoliberal populists, including Carlos Menem (Argentina) and Alberto Fujimori (Peru) rose to power by saddling traditional politicians with the responsibility for their countries’ economic crises, as a result of globalization and economic policies. Alongside an economy-focused populist message, these leaders embraced divisions between marginalized and elites, including indigenous, voices, speaking on their behalf in the face of elites. This was also core to the rise of more radical left-wing populists, including Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (Stavrakakis, et al., 2016), who positioned himself against a world order that held down ‘the people’ and stood against a “cartel of corrupt politicians” (De la Torre, 2017, p. 200) However, as De la Torre (2017) argues, populism in Latin America has featured both left-wing and right-wing characteristics. More recently, and since 2019, this observation has been reinforced in the right-wing populism of Jair Bolsonaro, who has applied a populist rhetoric more akin to European and North American populism in becoming and serving as the 38th president of Brazil (Kestler, 2022). Recently, Bolsonaro lost his 2022 re-election campaign to Inácio Lula da Silva, a left-wing populist.

Beyond the European and Latin American contexts, populist movements in the Middle East also have a long history (Filc, 2018). Distinct from populism in other regions by their characteristically religious underpinnings, populism has been identified in Middle Eastern countries as varied as Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and...
Israel (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Filc, 2018; Hadiz, 2016). In the African context, where populism has emerged, it did so as a response to the macro-economic and welfare crises of the 1980s (Nugent, 2004). Charismatic populist leaders there have pitted rural peasants, urban poor, and young people against the ‘corrupt elite’, including traditional chiefs, but also politically powerful groups, colonial powers, and foreign investors (Resnick, 2017). For instance, Jerry Rawlings in Ghana established the Provincial National Defense Council, coalizing with urban workers, peasants, and the unemployed, to facilitate people’s voice and provide “popular justice” (Resnick, 2017). Similarly, populism in Asia also emerged as a response to colonial powers in the 1950s. Countries experienced developmental populism (1960s to 1980s) and recent experiences with electoral populism (Mietzner, 2018), reflected in the campaigns, policies, and rhetoric of populist politicians including Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Joko Widodo in Indonesia. In contrast, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand represents “an unusual case of agrarian populism” (Hellmann, 2017, p. 166). He argues that industrial development in urban areas threatens the virtues and authenticity of the peasantry, who are “biologically and morally the most healthy people” (Hellmann, 2017, p. 166). By portraying himself as the true representative of the peasantry, Thaksin found a populist stance from which he constructs an image of himself as an “enemy” of the political elite and ruling class in Thailand (Hellmann, 2017).

While much research has been conducted to investigate the success and failure of right-wing populist parties (de Jonge, 2021; Frölich-Steffen & Rensmann, 2007; Rooduijn, De Lange & Van Der Brug, 2014; Taggart, 1995) and ups and downs of left-wing populist parties (De La Torre, 2016; Mouffe, 2018; Stavrakakis, et al., 2016), Chinese populism remains an unexplored field, particularly among international scholars. So far, no monograph on Chinese populism has been published in English, and none of the leading international handbooks or edited books on populism contain a chapter on the Chinese case. As a result, China, as the world’s most populous country, turns to be a missing piece and “mysterious” place for populist research.

1.2 Populism in China

In contrast to the thin, if not altogether absent, attention paid to populism in China
by international scholarship, China has not been insulated from the global rise of populism. According to reports from the Journal of People’s Forum, an academic journal affiliated to the People’s Daily Press, populism was the most influential ideological trend in 2016 and 2017 in China (People’s Forum, 2018), and it remained among the top-three most powerful ideologies from 2018 to 2020 (People’s Forum, 2020). Considering the interest in populism in Chinese society, and its place as a global power, this section briefly introduces the political and media environment as a background for understanding the rise of populism in China, as will be established in the chapters that follow.

1.2.1 China’s party-state and democratic meritocracy

China’s political system is characterized as a communist party-state (Joseph, 2019). According to Joseph (2019), China’s communist party-state has four distinct features. First, the communist party leads and controls the government at all levels of the state. The majority of the leaders in the government are party members. Second, Marxism-Leninism forms the basis for governance and is the official state ideology. This ideology is meant to lead the party-state “in building socialism and ultimately creating a truly egalitarian communist society” (Joseph, 2019, p. 13). Third, the communist party regards itself as a “vanguard party” in order to legitimize itself as playing a leading role in every sector of social life. Fourth, the communist party governs expressly in the name of the people and “therefore holds a monopoly on political power that precludes any meaningful opposition or contestation from other political parties or organizations” (Joseph, 2019, p. 14). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) further legitimates its governance as a noble politics and by appealing to and governing in the name of majority of people. This idea is deeply ingrained in communist discourse, such as “the mass” in the Mass Line discourse (1920s-1970s), the “overwhelming majority of the people” (zui guangda renmin) in the Three Represents discourse (1990s-2000s), and the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu) in the Rejuvenation discourse (2010s-now), as will be explored in chapter four. By positioning itself as representing the people, and governing in their name, the CCP has also limited, through rhetoric, the possibility for outsiders to make appeals in the name of the people. This stands in contrast to many other settings where populism has been explored, where the democratic possibilities of elections or referenda
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texture the rise of populist parties and leaders.

Rather than regarding China’s political system as a party-state ruled entirely from above, Bell (2015) views its political model as a democratic meritocracy, which “is not simply democracy at the bottom and meritocracy at the top: it is also based on extensive and systematic experimentation in between the lowest and highest levels of government” (p. 9). The Chinese model has three pillars in this framework. The first is democracy at the bottom, allowing leaders at the village and county level to be directly selected by the villagers aged eighteen or older. Experimentation of new policies on the local level of government is, then, the second pillar of this model. This experimentation ensures the central level that policies which are spread throughout the country are workable and efficient, as policies have been experimentally tested at the sub-central (sub-national) level. The third pillar is meritocracy at the top. Compared to a purely technocratic style of governance, China’s political meritocracy is “not only underpinned by expertise and intellectual ability, but more importantly by attributes such as virtue and social skills as well” (Chou, Moffitt & Bryant, 2020, p. 15). According to Bell (2015), political merit is determined according to three attributes: intellectual ability, social skills, and virtue. Intellectual ability refers to the intellect and expertise of aspiring political leaders. Social skill emphasizes “communication and emotional intelligence” in selecting and promoting political leaders. The third but most important attribute of political merit is virtue, which refers to the “desire to serve the public” (Bell, 2016, p. 108), and “serve the interests of the ruled, and not the ruler himself” (Bell, 2017, n.p.). Bell (2016) argues that virtue surpasses intellectual ability and social skills in the selection of political leaders in the China model.

Based on Bell’s (2015) work on democratic meritocracies, Chou, Moffitt, and Bryant (2020) have asked why China and Singapore, both defined as political meritocracies, “can theoretically be considered as relatively immune to populism” (p. 8). They propose three principal explanations. The first has to do with the processes and attributes through which political leaders are selected. Since democracy is restricted at the bottom (limited to the village and county level) and political leaders are not directly elected by the people, it is impossible for populist actors to gain political power through elections. Meanwhile, the attribute of virtue as a “desire to serve the
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public" (Bell, 2016, p. 108), and its surpassing intellectual ability and social skills in the selection of political leaders, is seen as a means to ensure virtuous politics. This virtuous politics is “a people-centric politic,” which allows meritocracies to “assuage populist discontent” (Chou, Moffitt & Bryant, 2020, p. 36). The second reason they offer for China’s, and Singapore’s, resilience in the face of a rise of populism is the possibility of upward mobility for the majority of the people. This can help undermine populist allegations that society unfairly institutionalizes elitism and inequality by providing opportunities for socio-economic change. The third reason they argue is that rule by the meritorious may “hypothetically increase a society’s chance of steering clear of avoidable crises”, which lessens political space for populism (Chou, Moffitt & Bryant, 2020, p. 8).

While Joseph’s (2019), Bell’s (2015) and Chou et al.’s (2020) research all identify several possible explanations for why the China model of, either, party-state governance or democratic meritocracy might be immune to the emergence of populist actors by design, China has nevertheless witnessed increased populism (Ma, 2015). Because it has emerged as an online bottom-up phenomenon (explored further in chapters two and five), it is described as online populism (Chen, 2011) and also termed digital populism (Tai, 2015). The relationship between populism and the Chinese internet, how populism has risen from China’s internet and its online characteristics, and whether the Chinese internet, like China’s democratic meritocracy political system, shows resilience towards populism, remain underexplored. The following section describes the rise of populism on the Chinese internet and the tensions between protest and control there.

1.2.2 The media environment: tension between protest and control

Since China was connected to the global internet in 1994, the population of internet users has increased rapidly, reaching 1.032 billion in December, 2021. This figure accounts for 73.13% of China’s population, as reported by the 49th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2021). As a growing number of people are connected to and by the internet, it has dramatically changed and reshaped business models, political participatory and protest culture, and social relationships in China, forming distinctive features of the Chinese internet (Yang, 2015). In terms of politics and
political culture online, one distinctive feature of the Chinese internet revolves around an extant tension between protest and control. The affordances of the internet not only allow people to articulate their voices, to participate in online activities, and to defend their civil rights through online protest, but also enable the government to control or govern the online public sphere. This is examined in detail in chapter two and further in chapter five, but for situating the discussion of Chinese populism throughout this thesis it is helpful to outline some aspects where the rise of the internet has had an effect on Chinese culture.

A first aspect of change has been in the development of a digital culture in China. As observed by Yang (2014), alongside the rise in the number of people being connected to the internet, a participatory and contentious cyberculture has emerged. The contentious nature of this cyberculture is, Yang (2014) argues, further stimulated by the semi-anonymous character of the internet, which allows netizens (as active internet users) to express their discontent, appeal for justice, and satirize political power with some semblance of privacy. The word “netizens” is a combination of “citizens” and “net,” referring to the people who use the internet as “citizens of the Net” (Hauben & Hauben, 1997). Netizens’ online protest is defined as “internet activism” in further work by Yang (2009), who conceptualizes internet activism as “claims-making contentious activities associated with the use of the internet” (p. 110). This activism takes place online when netizens collectively and connectively post and comment on contentious social issues (c.f. Theocharis, 2015), and when related messages circulate in major social media, online communities, and blogs. The causes underlying these online activities are embedded in structural “social dislocation and polarization, social injustices, and the rampant abuse of power” (Yang, 2014, p. 111), further provoked by government authorities’ behaviors of withholding information (a dynamic further examined in chapter five). Thus, in a crucial sense, “Internet protests are about the politics of transparency and accountability” (Yang, 2014, p. 111).

Among the various forms of activities enabled by the internet, one favored by netizens responding to contentious social issues and which concerns transparency politics, is “human flesh search” (HFS, Renrou sousuo, 人肉搜索). HFS, akin to doxing, is a malicious activity which involves searching for and publishing personal
information about individuals or subjects online, often done collaboratively by multiple users (Gao, 2016; He, Eldridge & Broersma, 2021; Pan, 2010). HFS, following the logic of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), may result in “pluralist framing of issues and creating space for open debates” (Sun, 2018, p. 38). While some scholars argue that HFS allows netizens to collectively criticize or even protest against the government (Zhang & Wu, 2005), thereby contributing to the formation of public deliberation, the government and official media regard HFS as internet lynching, claiming that “the internet gave people a disguise, enabling power without responsibility” (Bai & Ji, 2008). Since HFS may become “a new way of venting anger and revenge” (Xinhua News, 2008, n.p.), it is perceived as a threat to the stability of society. Thus, facing the challenges of online connective actions such as HFS, the Chinese government exerts control over the online digital world by censoring, filtering, and guiding public opinion.

In that final consideration, the Chinese internet can also be regarded as “a tool for authoritarian governance” (Sun, 2018, p. 48). According to the indication of the Eighteenth Party Congress of China, the government “should strengthen social management of the internet and promote orderly network operations in accordance with laws and regulations” (Xinhua News, 2012). This has led to a sophisticated censorship mechanism that aims to maintain a stable and harmonious society being developed. The censorship mechanism works in three ways. The first is “The Great Firewall of China,” which not only prevents and restricts certain internet companies and websites from operating in mainland China, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, but also prevent people in China from accessing restricted-websites. The second way of censorship is technologically enabled monitoring, blocking, and deleting content which is regarded as a potential threat to social stability. If the first two barriers fail, the third way to censor is through the manual efforts of individual censors. They are hired by the governments and media companies to delete and comment in order to sway and manipulate public opinion. These censors are also known as “50 cent party members, 五毛党 wumao dang,” because for every message they delete, they are paid fifty cents (Yang, Yang & Wilson, 2015). According to Chen and Ang (2011), across central, provincial and local governments, there are approximately 250,000 to 300,000 of these internet censors.
From these dynamics, and to understand China’s online populism (Chen, 2011), it needs to be considered in the context of how populism has arisen from the tensions between protest and control, and as an interplay of opportunities and limitations. On the one hand, the affordances of the internet provide netizens a channel and a space to express their voices, discontent, and criticism of government figures and decisions. This offers the government a “barometer” of public opinion, and also provides parameters for policy making (Luo, 2014). However, once expressions of discontent and criticism cross certain lines, they may lead to online connective activities as protests against corrupt elites and even the establishments. These actions can be seen as challenging the authority of the CCP and the central government (Schroeder, 2021), and when they do they are seen as potentially threatening China’s social stability. When this occurs or is seen as potentially occurring, the censorship mechanism, which blocks and constrains certain content from circulating online, is triggered.

Despite this, an online digital cyberculture with distinct populist characteristics is emerging in China. It is marked by the ways in which criticism is conveyed in playful, satirical, and visual styles to avoid harsh repression (Esarey & Qiang, 2008). These distinctive features of populist contestation raise new concerns and open up avenues for research. In particular, how does populism survive and rise through the tension between protest and control? Why is some criticism tolerated while other criticism is not; and what does online populism mean for a growing digitalized China? The thesis will address these questions and contribute to our knowledge of the impact of populism on Chinese society.

1.3 Key concepts: populism, the people and online public opinion

1.3.1 Populism

While the above sections have highlighted where populism has taken hold globally, and how it might be approached in the context of China, a clear and explicit conceptual framework of populism for interrogating these dynamics needs to be more fully established. This is particularly the case when researching “an essentially contested concept” (Mudde, 2007, p. 258) such as populism, around which research has proceeded “in a relatively staggered and disjointed manner” (Moffitt, 2016, p.
It is widely acknowledged that there is not a universally accepted concept of populism (Taggart, 2004). Part of the reason for this is that populism manifests itself differently in different social and cultural contexts. Accordingly, scholars define it in different ways based on the different social and cultural contexts in which populism emerges, such as a type of ideology (Mudde, 2004), strategy (Weyland, 2001), and discourse (Laclau, 2005). Thus, instead of providing a new conception of populism and making already confusing conceptual terrain even more complex, this thesis first reviews the origins of populism and the major conceptual developments in the field of populism research (also see chapter 2). It then follows the framework of “populism as a discourse” to reveal the distinctive features of populism, and then explain why China has been overlooked as a subject of populism research beyond China, despite its presence in China.

Historically, populism was used to describe two separate phenomena (Allcock, 1971). Populism first refers to the agrarian movement in the United States in the 1890s, when farmers in rural parts of the country joined to revolt against the economic elites on Wall Street and the political elites in Washington. This gave rise to the People’s Party as a response to the failure of both the Republican and Democratic Party to represent rural farmers and workers (Taggart, 2000). Populism, as a term, was first used to characterize the politicians of the People’s Party, such as William Jennings Bryant, who sought “to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with whose class it originated” (Hicks, 1931, p. 441).

In the second half of the twentieth century, “populism has been a far more potent force on the right” (Lowndes, 2017, p. 233). In its right-ward swing, populism has been conceptualized to describe a wide range of phenomena, such as extremism, xenophobia, and anti-semitism (Lipset, 1960). This right-wing populism in the United States and European countries in particular retains some features of the populist movement in the nineteenth-century, particularly the institutional formation of populist parties who claim to represent the will of “the people.” Right-wing populist parties continue to employ a rhetoric of anti-elitism and opposition to the establishment in the name of “the people,” aiming to defend their national cultural, identity against perceived attacks by others (Mudde, 2019). In this vein, economic nationalism, neo-nationalism, and social conservatism are often the main ideas behind right-wing populism (Zembylas, 2021).
Despite the fact that no populist party has emerged, due to the constraints of the party-state system in China, right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics has come into vogue online. This includes a form of online populism that not only “provokes a hostility towards immigrants, Muslims, feminism, the so-called ‘liberal elites,’ and progressive values in general” (Zhang, 2020, p. 88), but also revolts against political, cultural, and economic elites who are perceived as betraying “the people” and their Chinese identities (Liu, 2019). In contrast to the right-wing populist phenomenon in other liberal democracies, which is a top-down phenomenon (Aslanidis, 2016, 2017; De Nadal, 2021; Roberts, 2015), where charismatic leaders and populist parties serve as the mediators between “the people” and the elite, right-wing populism in China emerges as a bottom-up phenomenon, without implicit leadership (Chen, 2011). However, this bottom-up populist phenomenon confronts a party-state promoted communist rhetoric of governing in the name of the proletariat and revolting against the bourgeoisie, which can be traced back to the second origin of populism in Russian.

Another origin point for populism can be found in references to the Russian narodnichestvo of the 1860s-1870s, “a movement of Russian intellectuals who believed that the peasants were the revolutionary class that would bring about Russia’s social and political regeneration” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 13). In the 1860s and 1870s, with the development of capitalism and the permeation of education in Russia, a group of intellectuals emerged from among the peasants, citizens, and minor officials in Russia. Most of these intellectuals came from lower strata of society and were socially and economically closer to the common people. Benefiting from this closeness, they believed that “they had gained knowledge because the people had been deprived of their physical and mental dexterity, of access to culture and education, and therefore had to ‘atone’ for their sins” (Guan & Lin, 2017, p. 31). So, they launched the Narodnichestvo movements to settle down and live in villages, to “learn from the peasants and accept their wisdom” (Houwen, 2011, p.14), and to inform, mobilize, and educate peasants to revolt against the exploitation and oppression by the established system (Venturi, 1960; Houwen, 2011). This was part of an effort to reach socialism while bypassing capitalism (Walicki, 1969). However, the Narodnichestvo movement failed, in part due to peasants’ suspicion and denunciation of the movement, alongside the tsarist regime’s oppression of the
movement. The failure of the Narodnichestvo movement led to a division of Russian populism into three factions (Guan & Lin, 2017): some compromised with the Tsarist system and became liberal populists; one section calls itself Narodnaya Volya or the “People’s Will/Freedom” faction, and took the terrorist path of assassination to achieve change (Houwen, 2011); and the third faction of people began to find new revolutionary forces among the workers, embracing Marxism and taking the path of proletarian socialism.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can be understood as a Marxist successor on the path of proletarian socialism. While embracing Marxism, the CCP also embraced Russian populist ideas. For instance, the Mass Line in Maoism of “consulting the masses, interpreting their will, and implementing policies in their interests” (Lin, 2019, p. 121) is similar to the Narodinchestvo movement of learning from the peasants and accepting their wisdom (Houwen, 2011, p. 14). It is for this reason that Hu (1999a, 1999b), who was the former dean of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out that after 1953, Mao’s thought had essentially fallen into the category of populism. In the 21st century, China has witnessed a revival of the Mass Line in CCP theory and praxis after President Xi came into power. This revival is “not a short-term movement,” the Xinhua News (2013) reported.

By clarifying the origins of populism, it is clear that the two traditions of populism coexist in the context of China. However, what remains to be explored is how populism is understood in China, and how the power dynamics between right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics and party-state-led communist populism affect Chinese society and our understanding of populism as a global phenomenon.

1.3.2 The people

Despite the fact that populism is “an essentially contested concept” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2) and that there is no universally accepted definition, scholars do agree that the people is the key reference to understanding populism, because “all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to ‘the people’” (Canovan, 1981, p. 294). While the people is central to understanding populism, it has been described as an “empty signifier” by Laclau (2005) who draws attention to how this term is understood variably by different
actors and movements to suit their particular ambitions. In this regard, it is correct for Canovan to claim that “the people’ is undoubtedly one of the least precise and most promiscuous of concepts” (2005, p. 140). As a result, populists can “frame the people in a way that appeals to different constituencies and articulates their demands” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). While this can have the effect of making the people appear to be a loose and inconsistent categorization, the empty and malleable nature of the people also makes populism a powerful concept in how it is operationalized.

Who are the people in populist discourse? Scholars who have investigated the meanings attached to the people argue that various meanings are often used in combination, or even interchangeably, with one another. Canovan (1999) identifies three different senses of the people: the united people, our people, and ordinary people. Mény and Surel (2002) differentiate between the people as political (people-sovereign), economic (people-class) and cultural (people-nation). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue that the people is often used in a flexible interweaving of three meanings: as sovereign, common people, and the nation. This conceptual malleability and flexibility of the people has enabled populists to frame it according to their own interests, which is part of what “makes populism such a powerful political ideology and phenomenon” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9).

What makes the people so special in understanding populism? The importance of the people in populism is derived from its conceptual tensions which primarily manifest along two axes: the vertical axis of power and the horizontal axis of boundaries (Canovan, 2005; Espejo, 2017). According to modern democratic theories, legitimacy and political power rest with the sovereign people, who should be the titular holders of societal power. However, whether seen as individuals or as a collective body, the people are rarely the actual wielders of power. In practice, the actual holders of power, particularly within the populist framing of the relationship between the people and power, are those “corrupt” elites who “are defined on the basis of power,” including those who “hold leading positions within politics, the economy, the media, and the arts” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 12). The tension between the titular holders and the actual wielders of power underpins populists’ arguments that “politics should be an expression of the general will of the people”
(Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). The other discursive tension of *the people* revolves around its demarcation: it can be conceptualized as both inclusive and exclusive. When *the people* is framed as a relatively inclusive concept, it refers to a whole and integral political body, unifying and capturing as many people as possible. When *the people* is framed as an exclusive concept, it refers to the common people in general, including “the poor, underprivileged, and the excluded” (Agamben, 2000, p. 29). Privileged rulers, political elites, and the upper classes are typically excluded from this conception of *the people*.

However, and as will be further shown in the studies in this thesis, conceptions of the people that focus on either inclusive framings, speaking to an integral body, or exclusive framings, leaving out political elites and upper classes, are not universally applicable. In China, this is partly reflected in the language, and further reinforced in the structures of society. In Chinese, *the people* has many synonyms. For example, *the people* is defined as *qunzhong* (mass, 群众) and *dazhong* (populace, 大众), indicating that the people are the majority in society; a more inclusive conception. Similarly, *shumin* (plebeian, 庶民), *pingmin* (civilian, 平民) and *baixing* (common people, 百姓), refer to the people as objects of governance, defining their position from a ruler and ruled perspective (Yuan, 2015). In contrast, the concept of *min* (the people) does not incorporate the rulers and privileged elites; a more exclusive conception. This is further complicated by history. In ancient China, governmental power was not seen as legitimized by the people (the emperors claimed a divine mandate), but the people did legitimize “noble politics”. The idea then was that “noble politics” should represent the will of the people, and this understanding of politics is deeply ingrained in China’s ancient political thought of “yimin weiben, the primacy of the people” (Feng, 2005). This notion can be traced back two millennia, to *Shangshu* (*Book of History*), which proclaims that “the people are the sole foundation of the state; when the foundation is firm, the state is peaceful” (as cited by Perry, 2015, p. 905).

While language and history provide us some understanding of what *the people* can be understood to be in China and the complicating factors in these conceptions, conceptions become more complicated now a growing number of the people are connected by and to the internet. Netizens are hyper-active users who are notable
for their activities such as online “everyday political talk” (Sun, 2018), online political participation, and online protest. Therefore, the overlap between the people and the netizens raises new concerns for the understanding of populism. For instance, to what extent do the netizens represent the people? And to what extent do the appeals netizens make, represent the will of the people?

1.3.3 The general will and online public opinion in China

In Mudde’s conceptualization of populism as “a thin-centered ideology,” he argues that “politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (2017, p.6). Alongside the people, general will is perhaps the other consistently identified key concept in understanding populism. The concept of the general will traces back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who differentiated between the general will, the will of all, and the private will. According to Rousseau (2016), general will is “the will all citizens have as members of the political society of the social compact” (Rawls, 2007, p. 224), which legislates “to enforce their common interest” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16). The will of all refers, instead, to the simple sum of the competing interests of all the people, each of these being an example of individuals’ private will. In this differentiation, general will is not a collection of private will, or “the will of the society as a whole as such,” but “a form of deliberative reason that each citizen shares with all other citizens in virtue of their sharing a conception of their common good” (Rawls, 2007, p. 224). Within political theory advanced by Rousseau, the general will is always right and tends to the public and common good, whereas the private will is not afforded this attribute of being correct. Populists’ beliefs that politics should reflect the general will of the people benefit from this distinction. Linking populist discourse with the moral legitimacy of the general will empowers them to speak as if they are standing with the backing of the entire population, towards its common good. In this framing, the contrast is equally important, as it allows populists to identify anyone who opposes them as, morally, wrong and as acting against the general will of the people and the common good (Espejo, 2017).

In electoral democratic contexts, populists challenge established members of representative governments for their failures to represent the will of the people. In these dynamics, the people are regarded as passive entities who are limited to only
selecting a representative for themselves. Thus, populist actors often appeal to the will of the people in order to implement a direct, unmediated self-government where the people can make and execute laws by themselves. Thus, “one of the practical consequences of populism is the strategic promotion of institutions that enable the construction of the presumed general will” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 17). The rise of populist parties, such as the National Front in France and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, is a manifestation of such practical consequences. These populist parties appeal in the name of the people, and portray themselves as the true representatives of the people.

By appealing in the name of the general will of the people, on the one hand, populists are legitimated to challenge the establishments and the political status quo. From this point of view, populism can be regarded as a democratizing force since it defends marginalized groups that are not represented or are betrayed by the establishments. On the other hand, populism “may well lead to the support of authoritarian tendencies” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 18), because populism implies that the general will is not only always right but also absolutely leads to the common good. As a result, it legitimizes “authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of the people” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 19).

Over the past two decades, the internet has dramatically reshaped civic society in China. Afforded by the internet, netizens are empowered to express their voices and concerns, broaching topics previously ignored, allowing bottom-up agenda-setting (Polonski, 2018), and formation of online public opinion. However, due to the virtuality and semi-anonymous features of the internet, opinions expressed online are often polarized due to the low accessing barrier, facilitating the dissemination of fake news, conspiracy theories, and mis/disinformation. This further increases social fragmentation and polarization (Debatin, 2008). Furthermore, in the context of China, netizens’ daily discussion and the formation of online public opinion are under strict monitoring, control, and censorship from the government.

The new affordances that the internet allows people challenge the understanding of Chinese populism. First, the emergence of a group of hyperactive netizens further
blurs the demarcation or boundary in the concept of *the people*. While *the people* often refers to those who are marginalized, unrepresented, and underprivileged (Agamben, 2000), netizens refers to those who use the internet. Thus, it becomes even harder to address the aspects of inclusion and exclusion when people turn to netizens online. Second, netizens get more voice and outreach if they own more social capital or are more sophisticated in their online skills, regardless of whether their voice is genuinely the most representative. This complicates claims to speak for the public in terms of “general will.” Furthermore, the government’s censorship mechanisms make it difficult to determine the extent to which online public opinion serves as a proxy for the general will.

### 1.3.4 Towards a framework for discursive analysis

Instead of providing a wholly new conception of *populism* in order to study it in China, making an already confusing conceptual system even more complex, the research in this thesis follows the discursive approach to understanding populism. In particular, I will pay attention to the ways of political expression evident in linguistic text-based and visual-based materials. The discursive approach is followed for several reasons. First, the party-state and democratic meritocracy political system in China constrain the opportunities for populist leaders to emerge within the one-party system. As a result, definitional approaches that focus on populism as something mediated by charismatic leaders, such as *political strategy*, *political style*, *social cultural phenomenon* and *authoritarian populism*, are inapplicable in China. Second, regarding populism as a mode of political expression, as afforded by the discursive approach, provides an avenue to understand populism through concrete research objects, such as through the analysis of speeches, texts, media content, and online communication. Third, research that has aimed to understand populist ideology has primarily extracted an understanding of that ideology from language materials, such as political texts and speeches. This approach sees these materials, first and foremost, as discursive representations of ideological positions. As a research approach it thus allows us to explore populism through the analysis of concrete materials rather than abstract ideas. Last but not least, viewing populism as a discourse enables the understanding of populism across time, space, and various political spectra (including left-right).
The analytical framework applied in this thesis concentrates on (1) the discursive practices of *articulation*, and (2) the political logic of *dynamic antagonism* between the pure people and the corrupt elite. Populism as discourse draws on poststructuralist discourse theory which is originally formulated by Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2001) and further developed by De Cleen (2019), Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis (2000), and Moffitt (2016). According to poststructuralist discourse theory, the discursive construction of meaning is an articulation process (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 305). *Articulation* refers to “the practice of bringing together pre-existing discursive elements in a particular way in a (hegemonic) bid to construct a more or less novel arrangement of meaning” (Laclau & Mouffe, [1985] 2001, p.105).

In this manner, populism as a discourse is understood as a process by which discursive elements are welded to articulate a crisis caused by corrupt elites in society, a crisis that works against the interest of the ‘the people’. It also involves a claim articulation process, through which populists are positioned as representing the general will of the people. To put it another way, regarding populism as a discourse for Laclau (2005) does not speak to or for the pre-existing people, “but arguably bring the subject known as ‘the people’ into being through the process of naming, performance or articulation” (Moffitt, 2016).

Populism as a discourse, furthermore, follows a specific political logic (Laclau, 2005). Following Laclau’s work, De Cleen (2019) advocates seeing populism as a political logic that revolves around two nodal points of “the people” and “the elite.” In doing so, an understanding of “the people’ as a large powerless group and ‘the elite’ as a small illegitimately powerful group” is constructed. Following this logic, populists and populism can be understood by studying their claims “to represent ‘the people’ against a (some) illegitimate ‘elite’, and how it constructs its political demands as representing the will of ‘the people’” (De Cleen, 2019, p. 29).

A further advantage of this approach to understanding populism as a discourse with a certain political logic rests on how it allows research to focus on how *the people* as an empty and floating signifier is articulated. In doing so, it allows for understanding how both the dichotomous relationship between the people and the elite, as well as any anti-institutional demands, are formulated. From this point of view, and
considering that the process of articulation should be seen as a dynamic construction process rather than as a static irreconcilable conflict (De Cleen, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), it emphasizes where the nodal points of populism rest on the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite. As a framework, this approach does not dictate what discursive logic will be followed in the dynamic articulation process; rather, it leaves it open for empirical work to surface these logics through the study of discursive processes.

With these considerations in mind, the research in this thesis will expand our understanding of populism globally and specifically in China by studying the dynamic articulation process of populists’ discourse, and which discursive logics are being followed, in the process of formulating two antagonistic polarized groups: the people and the elite.

1.4 Gaps in knowledge

Populism as a phenomenon has attracted a great deal of attention by scholars, as reflected in the large body of literature in scientific journals, books, edited collections, and in the active conferences, networks, and funded projects devoted to understanding populism around the world (see: Hunger and Paxton, 2022). While the overview above highlights how this has been, largely, focused on populism in Europe, Latin America, North America, and a number of studies ‘beyond the west’, the body of populism research also includes a large number of studies on populism being conducted in China (see chapter two for a further review of this work). However, as these studies are primarily published in Chinese and in Chinese academic journals, it is a body of work that remains unknown to and under-scrutinized by scholars working outside of China. This frames one of the goals of this thesis, which is to bring Chinese populism into conservation with a wider range of populist phenomena and populist research globally, enhancing our understanding of populism as it manifests beyond democratic contexts.

To be certain, some research on Chinese populism has been published in English and offers us ways of reflecting on and thinking through aspects of populism in relation to China (Guan & Yang, 2020; Miao, 2020; Schroeder, 2021; Tai, 2015). For instance, Miao (2020) investigates how the people, the elite, and others are
constructed by grassroots populist narratives found in Chinese cyberspace. However, this research selects as a case study public debates on Trump’s electoral victory on Zhihu (a Quora-like question-and-answer platform in China, with 68 million registered users and 18.5 million daily active users). The people, the elite, and the other within this study are therefore contextualized according to prominent US political dynamics, rather than in terms of their manifestations within China. As a result, while offering a useful way of thinking through how grassroots populist narratives construct the people, the elite, and others, a gap in understanding these in the Chinese context remains.

Elsewhere, through an online survey on populist attitudes, Guan and Yang (2020) first identify two subtypes of populism: rights-oriented populism and responsibility-oriented populism. While the former is “negatively correlated with system justification and national identification” (p.672), the latter is strongly associated with higher levels of system justification, well-being, and national identification. This research benefits our understanding of populism by taking the socio-political and psychological origins of populism into consideration. However, this study does not address dimensions of the overall media environment, nor does it engage specifically with dynamics of digital culture and the internet. Since the rise of Chinese populism research and discussions of populism in China have been closely related to the increase in internet and social media users (Ma, 2015). Therefore, the online features of populism should not be ignored. Picking up on this relationship between populism and digital media, Schroeder (2021) argues that populism in China is both easy and hard to control due to its online nature. Populism in China is easy to control because it happens mostly online in a media environment with significant censorship mechanisms, and further because it does not usually result in offline protests in the cities and streets of China. At the same time, populism is also hard to control in China because the affordances of digital media allow the people, covered by the semi-anonymity of the internet, to articulate, appeal, and protest, forming “online counter-public spheres” that “can set the agenda” (Schroeder, 2021, p. 179), and sway “judicial decisions—even death sentences” (Tomoko, 2018, n.p.). This leads to what Li (2017) and Miao (2013) refer to as penal populism. In his research, Tai (2015) explores the mass collaboration of collective actions from a populism perspective, proposing a concept of “digital populism”
(p.124) that offers a useful focal point for understanding populism in this context. However, a lack of broader comparative work means the unique features of digital populism have not been fully revealed.

Further research has addressed the political culture in China, regarding Maoism as a form of populism, and exploring the communist features of populism (Li, 2021; Perry, 2015; Townsend, 1977). These studies argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “has used populist narratives to bolster their credentials” (Li, 2021, p. 377) since its foundation. The Mass Line, credited to Mao, has become a powerful rhetorical weapon for the CCP to not only mobilize and unify peasants and workers, but also to achieve Chinese characteristic of democratization. For example, Korolev (2017) argues that if the Mass Line is used as a channel for people to articulate and aggregate their interests, rather than as a propaganda instrument for the government, it has the potential to “offer China alternative routes of democratization” (p.7). This alternative route for democratization is further “understood in populist rather than institutional terms,” and is seen as a “populist dream of Chinese democracy” (Perry, 2015, p. 903). To this point, recently China has witnessed a revival of the Mass Line after Xi Jinping came into power. It has been described as something Xi has utilized to purify the CCP. However, the extent to which these developments clarify differences between communist populism and “digital populism” (Tai, 2015), if at all, and where Mass Line ideology fits into this development, remain unclear. Furthermore, questions remain as to the effects on Chinese society when communist populism and digital populism are both in play, and whether the two can coexist.

Each of these studies offer further encouragement to engage with the phenomenon of Chinese populism, and each also opens new doors to inquiry. While case studies, surveys of populist attitudes, and attention paid to the online environment and political ideology move our understanding forward, there remains a gap in our understanding of Chinese populism that can be addressed in a systematic and comparative approach. Furthermore, to avoid seeing Chinese populism as a peculiar phenomenon isolated from the global academic study of populism, I argue that there is a need for work that has the specific ambition of bringing these phenomena into conversation with the wider international literature on populism. In short, while initial
research has offered us ways to consider Chinese populism, the unique characteristics of Chinese populism have not yet been thoroughly revealed.

1.5 Objective and research questions

In order to address these gaps in existing research, this thesis focuses on the following research questions:

(1) What are the distinctive characteristics of Chinese populism? How do these unique features of Chinese populism contribute to our knowledge of populism?

(2) Who are the people? How are the people discursively constructed in Chinese populist discourse? And, how is this different from the understanding of the people in other social-cultural contexts?

(3) During the articulation process, what discursive logics are followed? And what are the social-cultural impacts of the discursive construction of populist antagonism between the people and the elite?

(4) How are socially and culturally ingrained visual semiotics used to characterize netizens’ affinities with “the people” and dislikes of “the elite” in Chinese populism? And how do populist visual rhetoric and visual communication contribute to our understanding of populism and how it relates to nationalism?

In addition to the above research questions, an overarching aim of this thesis is to explain why China has seemed to be relatively resilient to the rise of populism when compared with democratic regimes. Chou, Moffitt, and Bryant (2020) have identified the resilience of China’s meritocratic political system in terms of the rise of populist leaders within the party system. They specifically argue that virtue as a “desire to serve the public” (Bell, 2016, p. 108) surpasses intellectual ability and social skills in the selection of political leaders and allows meritocracies to “assuage populist discontent” (Chou, Moffitt & Bryant, 2020, p. 36). However, their research did not address the media’s role in populism, leaving the impact that the rise of the internet and online media has had, and how this might relate to populism, unexplored. This thesis adds to what is known about Chinese populism by explaining why China’s media ecology, including its online cultures, is integral to understanding this
particular phenomenon. By considering the way the government censorship of media can serve to depolarizes populist discourse and relieve the pressure of the “social volcano” in China (Whyte, 2010), it offers insights for understanding the limits and opportunities of both populism and government control in light of digital technologies and media.

1.6 Thesis outline

To answer these questions, four empirical studies have been conducted. The findings not only reveal several distinctive features of Chinese populism, they also provide multiple insights into and implications for understanding populism as a global phenomenon.

Chapter 2 maps the field of populism research, clarifies conceptual approaches, and provides a comparative study between populist research in democratic contexts and populist research conducted in China. It first reviews the state of the art of populism research in democratic contexts, identifying seven approaches to conceptualizing populism: ideational, political-strategic, sociocultural, discursive, political style, collective action, and critical theory approaches. Then, by further reviewing the literature of Chinese populism scholarship and bringing it into conversation with a wider body of literature in democratic contexts, it identifies two distinctive sub-types of populism within China’s populism research: communist populism and online bottom-up populism. The former is advanced via official channels, primarily 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 the “corrupt elites,” and is characterized primarily by its online, bottom-up dynamic. Since communist populism also appeals in the name of the people, as it regards the communist party as the true representatives of the people, this form of populism serves to weaken the discursive power of online bottom-up populism, particularly when it targets elite groups and established institutions. The existence of communist populism not only assuages the challenges resulting from online bottom-up populism, it also, to some extent, demonstrates China’s resilience in the face of the rise of online bottom-up populism.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed within the empirical studies in this
thesis, including how these are developed to examine discursive power and the meanings associated to the people, discursive logics of populism, and online populist visual communication. Through a mixed methodological framework that integrates discourse analysis with multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, 2005) with computational grounded theory (Nelson, 2020), it is able to process various genres and large amounts of data. Specifically, it offers a novel methodological framework for examining data from Sina Weibo, including hashtags and posts (an approach that can also be used to explore data from Twitter or other microblogging platforms). This method compensates for the limitations of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003) to identify subjects over time and the difficulty of selecting the number of topics. The methods and methodological approaches undertaken in this thesis benefit the overall research project on at least two levels. First, where it incorporates computational grounded theory approaches, it tackles the urgent need to combine expert human knowledge and the hermeneutic abilities of humans with the processing power of computers in order to address the ongoing and accelerating datafication of society. Second, this chapter will show how adopting multiple methods responds to the argument that, depending on the genre and size of the data, various methodological approaches, such as qualitative, quantitative, and computational methods, can be combined to encourage clarity and interpretation within the research. This chapter also points out the challenges and potential shortcomings of the methodological designs in this study. In doing so, it shows where future research can move the understanding of populism and Chinese populism forward by addressing these limitations.

Chapter 4 explores the conceptual tensions around the people, clarifying the discursive power of the people in cases where populism is evident in China. It approaches the discursive power of the people from two dimensions: the vertical axis of power (the power of the sovereign people: the titular holders and actual wielders) and the horizontal axis of boundaries (the demarcation of the people: inclusiveness and exclusiveness) (Canovan, 2005; Espejo, 2017). By examining how the people are defined in 61 populism cases through discourse and meta-analyses, three meanings attached to the people are disentangled: the people as Chinese nation, as the mass, and as socially vulnerable groups. The Chinese nation
emerges as an ethnocultural construction which functions as an ideological glue to capture not only domestic but also Chinese people overseas under one nation. This is often utilized in communist populism rhetoric to mobilize Chinese people to protest against those who are seen as betraying or humiliating the Chinese identity. Seeing the *people* as the *mass* is associated with the affective aversion to scientists and experts (Hofstadter, 1963) but it is also evident in the mass support for a satirical sub-culture that challenges the hegemony of elite-dominated cultural production and cultural institutions. *Socially Vulnerable Groups*, as the third category, refers to those who occupy a subaltern position in terms of status and financial stability, and those who are powerless in formulating policy. This chapter argues that by disentangling the meanings attached to *the people*, another distinctive feature can be identified in contemporary Chinese populism: the role of netizens. In China, technologically adept hyper-users of digital media, or *netizens*, amplify the voices of the people, airing their grievances and dissatisfaction online, further pitting the people against the corrupt elites and establishment. If populism in democratic contexts is to be understood as a top-down approach in which populist leaders and parties position themselves rhetorically and politically to serve as intermediaries between the pure people and the corrupt elite, online populism in China can be understood as a bottom-up phenomenon. In this bottom-up approach, the people are semi-anonymously hidden behind digital media, allowing them to directly express their voices, to make their appeals for grievance and change, and to air their discontent online. Understanding this as a populist phenomenon allows research to understand how the people collectively raise public concerns and public discontent as a particular manifestation of the rhetoric of “people versus elites” that is found globally in dynamics of populism.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the discursive logics of populist articulation on social media. This chapter attempts to explain why the Chinese media environment seems relatively resilient to the rise of populism. Further, it explores how low-level and high-level affordances of Chinese social media both enable and constrain the expression of populist fervor online, and how this contributes further to this relative resilience. This is shown through an in-depth analysis of the dynamic relationship between polarizing online bottom-up populist discourse and the depolarization strategies of the government’s censorship mechanism in China. By analyzing the
hashtags and posts around the case #DrivingIntoThePalaceMuseum through a mixed methodology that combines grounded theory to analyze the use of hashtags in the social media use around this case, and computational grounded theory to analyze related social media posts, three discursive logics are identified. First, an antagonism logic is reflected in the articulation of social-cultural gaps between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’. Second, by looking at how these discourses manifest, our analysis identifies a polarization logic that broadens and deepens antagonistic gaps in the people-elite relationship. This is demonstrated through connective practices of “Human Flesh Search” and the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. Third, a protest logic emerges, with users seeking common solutions to key social issues through crowd-enabled connective action on digital platforms. This study and this chapter show that while the affordances of social media enable populist discourse polarization, they also enable depolarization through the government’s use of censorship mechanisms. Furthermore, this study shows that despite the resistant nature of populist online protest, within these spaces populist discourses also demonstrate nonviolent and obedient attributes. This helps identify how bottom-up populism reflects a dynamic articulation that demonstrates an awareness of China’s censorship mechanisms. This offers a nuanced understanding of media affordances as both enabling and constraining populist discourse. Within the Chinese media environment, this dynamic articulation serves as a “pressure valve,” releasing the build-up of populist sentiment in a Chinese “social volcano.”

Chapter 6 focuses on populist visual communication, exploring how socially and culturally ingrained visual semiotics are used to characterize netizens’ affinities with “the people” and their dissatisfaction with “the elite,” which has become characteristic of China’s online bottom-up populism. It also investigates how communist populism redirects online bottom-up populist discontents towards external others, promoting a nationalist discourse to relieve the internal pressure in Chinese society. By analyzing the “weaponized” internet memes that were used during the Diba Expedition on Facebook in 2016, 2018 and 2019, through multimodal discourse analysis, it identifies three socially and culturally embedded visual semiotics: the playful Jiong style, political iconography, and the use of colour. The playful Jiong style, on the one hand, is utilized to construct a self-mocking
identity of Diba users (or Diaosi), who are regarded in China as grassroots underdogs without wealth or privileged family backgrounds. Part of this identity is a self-perception of having no future. On the other hand, this self-deprecating style appears alongside the use of the same Jiong playful style as a means to deconstruct the authority of political and cultural elites. By capturing “Jiong” facial expressions (e.g. expressions of shock, awkwardness, embarrassment, etc.), netizens are able to delegitimize the power of elites by creating an irrational and emotional image of these elites within memes that feature these expressions. Turning towards political iconography, this study shows how iconography is used within memes to reflect the collective nostalgic evocation of a communist past, to demonstrate the people as underdogs, and to express their discontent with the current realities of social inequality in China. Colour is the third visual semiotic in the sample, with a variety of semiotic possibilities, including linkage with other culturally salient elements and their meanings. The two component colours of the Chinese national flag, red and yellow, are the two most frequently employed colours by Chinese netizens in weaponized internet memes. In that context, they serve as a means of demonstrating netizens’ loyalty to “red” China. Examining these memes within the context of three online expedition cases related to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Sweden, we can see that communist populist discourse appeals are being made in the name of the Chinese nation rather than being seen simply as expressions of discontent. They are weaponized in the mobilization of China’s younger generations to mount a grassroots protest against external others. By recontextualizing populism in a nationalist context and redirecting young people’s discontent from internal concerns towards external others, these expeditions expand our understanding of the unique characteristics of online populism in China. This also provides insights in how, to some extent, online expressions of discontent with elites in society are redirected towards external (perceived) enemies, thereby releasing the buildup of internal pressure within China’s “social volcano.”

Finally, chapter 7 returns to the initial questions raised in this introductory chapter, highlighting the findings from the empirical studies, to present the findings of this research project and draw together its conclusions. It does so by first addressing the distinctive features of populism in China, focusing on its online bottom-up nature. It also explains how the “pressure valve” functions within the
context of online populism and in relation to China’s “social volcano.” This thesis closes by highlighting the theoretical implications of research on Chinese populism for the understanding of populism as a global phenomenon. From these findings, it identifies several avenues for future populism research that considers cases like China’s within the wider conversation of populism taking place internationally, rather than as siloed case studies.

Overall, this thesis is an attempt to move our understanding of populism from being seen as primarily a Western phenomenon reshaping democracies to one that is also playing out in the East, where nations have different political, cultural, and state structures. It aims to expand our aperture for understanding populism, from the attention paid to top-down populism characterized by politicians and parties seeking electoral outcomes that has been dominant in literature to also consider bottom-up populism as it manifests online, and in places where the opportunities for democratic change are absent. It ultimately aims to show that populism manifests differently across diverse political and media landscapes. Finally, in an era when we are experiencing dramatic changes in how our political cultures, media ecologies, and forms of communication are organized, and how these are being consistently reshaped in the context of an increasingly digitized world, it seems all the more important to bring these various studies into a dialogue. Thus, the global rise of populism can only be understood by investigating how populism manifests in distinctive social-cultural settings. To do so, we need to move our understanding from the West to the East, from offline to online, and from democracy to beyond.