Bottom-up and online populism in contemporary China

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Chapter 7

Summary and conclusion
Chapter Seven

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Populism manifests itself differently in different political landscapes and media environments. In an era in which societies are experiencing rapid processes of digitalization, platformization, and datafication, political cultures, media ecologies, and forms of communication are constantly being changed and reshaped (Van Dijck, 2021). It is in this context where we can see populism’s symbolic relationship with the political and media landscape also undergoing dynamic and constant change. While this has been explored in scholarship, research has largely centered on populism in Western contexts, however, its rise in the context of China with a communist background remained underexplored. The studies in this PhD thesis aim to address those gaps in our understanding of populism, by better understanding populism in China, specifically.

This thesis argues that by investigating the distinctive manifestations of populism in varied social-cultural contexts, we can expand our understanding of populism as a global phenomenon. Thus, rather than arguing there is a set of universal features that all forms of populism have, it advocates for understanding where populist dynamics manifest themselves in unique ways in distinct settings in order to develop a more fulsome picture of populism as a phenomenon. It has done this by exploring the distinct characteristics of populism in China, as a place that has not been thoroughly explored (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). China remains largely unknown and under-researched in international scholarship on populism. This thesis has endeavored to close this gap, bringing an understanding of populism in China into conversation with the wider body of research on populist phenomena globally. In undertaking this task, it has attempted to reveal the distinctive features of populism in China, in particular by focusing on its online bottom-up nature. Providing a novel and original way of seeing populism as an online bottom-up phenomenon, it has examined the discursive power of the people, the discursive logics of online bottom-up populist articulation, and populist visual communication. In addition, it has also investigated the tensions between resistance and control, and how populism functions as a “pressure valve” for China’s “social volcano” (Whyte, 2010).
The unique characteristics of populism in China provide a number of implications for understanding populism, and the findings also open avenues for future research. This concluding chapter emphasizes the central arguments advanced throughout the thesis: that populism in China is an online bottom-up phenomenon, one that is mediated by the netizens who protest against the “corrupt elite” in the name of the people. Moreover, it argues that the discursive articulation of populism in online environments functions as a “pressure valve” that releases the internal pressure of China’s “social volcano.” The concluding chapter closes by sketching out potential future research avenues for understanding Chinese populism and for comparative study on a global scale.

7.1 Populism in contemporary China

This thesis incorporates four studies into key issues in populist inquiry in contemporary China. They focus on how we can conceptualise populism across political systems and relate this to the distinctive characteristics of Chinese populism, on the discursive power that the concept of the people provides Chinese bottom-up populism with, on the discursive logics in populist online communication, and finally, on populist visual communication through weaponized Internet memes. The following section summarises the main findings of populist inquiry in contemporary China.

7.1.1 The distinctive characteristics of Chinese populism

Chinese populism has distinctive characteristics that remain unknown to international scholars. This thesis unravels these distinctive characteristics through a systematic review of Chinese scholarship on populism, bringing it into conversation with the wider body of literature outside of China. Through a comparative study of conceptual approaches between China and liberal democratic contexts, three distinctive features are revealed: the coexistence of communist populism and online bottom-up populism, the absence of electable charismatic leaders, and Chinese populism’s online bottom-up features.

Coexistence of communist populism and online bottom-up populism
Chapter 7

Following a systematic and comparative study of research on populism in China and in Western democracies (see chapter two), the first distinctive feature of Chinese populism that emerges is the coexistence of communist populism and online bottom-up populism. Communist populism refers to the state’s invocation of the wisdom, identity, value, and revolutionary potential of “the people,” protesting against the perceived corrupt elite in the name of “the people” in order to legitimate and reinforce their governing position in the party-state system (He, Eldridge & Broersma, 2021). This communist feature is deeply embedded in the Chinese communist socio-cultural background. Going further, the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie found in communism is strongly echoed in the antagonism between “the people” and the elite found in populism. In both communism and populism, we find an opposition being established between a “pure” majority, understood as either the proletariat in communism or “the people” in populism, and the “evil” corrupt bourgeoisie (communism) and elite (populism). Alongside communist populism, a second subtype of populism that exists in China is online bottom-up populism. This is a manifestation of populism found in online grassroots-level discourses, targeting certain societal elites (the detailed understanding of online bottom-up populism will be illustrated in section 7.2). Despite their similarities, communist populism and online bottom-up populism are in constant processes of cooperation, competition, and gaming. For instance, when facing challenges from foreign others or corrupt elites who are considered to betray their Chinese identities, they cooperate with each other and protest in the name of the Chinese nation. This becomes evident in the mobilization of online communities in ways that evoke both anti-elite populist and nationalist communist discourses (see chapter six). In chapter four, through a case study of Dongguan Anti-pornography Movement, research has also demonstrated how they are competing with each other. While the official discourse states that the aims of the movement are to purify society for the interests of “the people,” the online bottom-up populist discourse regards the prostitutes as members of a “socially vulnerable group,” challenging the authority of official discourse. At the same time, they are in a process of “gaming” when confronting social issues in China. When online bottom-up populist discourses polarize society, emphasizing the gap between China’s social elites and the pure people, communist populist discourses depolarize the same antagonism through technologically enabled censorship mechanisms, as demonstrated in chapter five.
**Absence of electable charismatic leaders**

The second distinctive feature of Chinese populism is the absence of electable charismatic leaders. Due to the party-state political system in China, democratic elections are restricted to the lower levels of China’s government systems, at the village and county level (Bell, 2016). This limits, significantly, the possibilities for charismatic leaders to emerge, to gain political power, and to secure a position of authority within the party-state election system. Following the one-party ideology and system, only the paramount leader should be portrayed as charismatic. While there are echoes to populism in that this leader is often depicted as the incarnation of the will of “the people” (Espejo, 2017), the structural limitations presented by the state-party system limit the parallels that could be drawn to seeing these leaders as populist. More to the point, the rise of other charismatic leaders, within this system, would be regarded as a challenge and a threat to the authority and legitimacy of the paramount leader and the party. This is evident in the high-profile case of Bo Xilai, who was the former Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing (Chou, Moffitt & Bryant, 2020). As a left-wing “populist with an iron fist” (The Economist, 2011), Bo attempted to move up to the top of the CCP’s leadership structure by bringing back the “cult of Mao” and encouraging “red” nostalgia (Chou, et al., 2020, p. 6). He advocated economic equality and social justice by building a populist image on behalf of the masses. However, the potential of this developing into a populist cult contradicts the importance of limiting seeing anyone other than the paramount leader as a charismatic voice of “the people”. So Bo was imprisoned during the Anti-corruption Movement of 2013, a campaign launched by the government of Xi Jinping.

**Online, bottom-up features of populism**

The third feature of Chinese populism is its online, bottom-up characteristic. The rise of online bottom-up populism is closely related to the popularity of digital media in China. The affordances of digital media provide unprecedented avenues for people to express their voices as underdogs in society, to make appeals for social change, and to air their grievances and express discontent with the status quo. People, who perceive themselves as similar because they share experiences of social injustice and economic inequality, are emotionally mobilized on digital platforms, such as
Sina Weibo and other online forums. Here they engage in online collective activism, arousing a public sense of grievance, indignation, and relative deprivation. Populist online activism is different from collective internet activism, as netizens appeal in the name of “the people” and protest against the corrupt elite and established institutions (as explained in chapter two). The expression of their voices, the articulation of their appeals, and the collective discussions emerging from the “bottom” of society serve as a “barometer” for the government higher “up”. They can take this into account in policy and decision-making and it thus urges the establishments to govern in a more transparent and accountable way (Yang, 2014). However, the affordances of digital media also allow the government to implement more nuanced control through technological censorship mechanisms, such as monitoring, filtering and deleting content that may jeopardize social stability. The censorship from the government aims to reduce the possibility of offline collective movements by “clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected” (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013, p. 326), restricting internet activism (Yang, 2019) from expanding from online discussions to offline activities.

7.1.2 The discursive power of the people

An explicit connotation of *the people* is central and crucial in any effort devoted to defining populism. Through discourse and meta-analysis on 61 populist cases, this thesis has disentangled the various meanings attached to *the people*. Three meanings attached to *the people* were disentangled in the case of Chinese populism: *the people* as the Chinese nation, as the mass, and as socially vulnerable groups. As explored in chapter four, these definitions differ in their inclusive and exclusive characteristics, and in the ways in which they frame *the people* and the corrupt elite they are pitted against within a populist dynamic.

**The people as the Chinese nation**

*The people as the Chinese Nation* is an inclusive conception of *the people*. It serves as an ideological glue meant to capture not only domestic but also overseas Chinese people under one nation. The Chinese nation, as Fei (1988) argues, emerges “as a result of China’s confrontation with the Western powers” (p. 167). Thus, the profile of the Chinese nation reflects a historical experience and self-perception as both “a
victim” and “a victor” (Gries, 2004). Framing the Chinese nation as “a victim” provides the psychological strength and discursive power to mobilize Chinese people, including the people in Taiwan and Hong Kong, who share historical colonial experiences. It promotes the glorious role of the CCP as “a victor,” saving the Chinese nation in the War of Resistance (1840-1942) and the Revolutionary War (1942-1949), thus ending the Century of Humiliation (1840-1949). This contrasting image of the Chinese Nation both “as a victim” and “as a victor” serves a further purpose. It assuages the discursive power of online bottom-up populism when it turns to target established state institutions, which are led by the CCP. In chapter four and six, we have explained how a communist “populist dream” of “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” is recontextualized in these instances as a nationalist protest against pro-independent elites in Taiwan and Hong Kong and against other external “others.” In this vein, communist populism and online bottom-up populism cooperate to fight against those elites who betray their Chinese identity or foreign others who humiliate the dignity of China.

The people as the mass

The people as the mass is considered from the perspective of culture. This concept is characterized not only by an anti-intellectualism associated with the affective aversion to scientists and experts (Hofstadter, 1963), but also through mass support for a satirical sub-culture advocated by the mass that challenges the hegemony of elite-dominated cultural production and cultural institutions (Sun, 2006). The people as the mass reveals the tension and dynamic between the masses and experts, and between mundane culture and elite culture. It particularly highlights the wisdom, identity and value of ordinary people in cultural production, challenging the cultural and intellectual authority of the elite.

The concept of the people as the mass reveals the tension and dynamic between mundane culture (Shaizhai Culture and Diaosi subculture) and elite-dominated culture. The popularity of the CCSTV Spring Festival Gala (in chapter two) and the rise of Shanzhai culture emerges as a populist rebellion against the taste, identity, and value of elite culture, attempting to delegitimize the authority of elite culture through comedic imitation. In chapter six, we also demonstrated the weaponizing processes of internet memes, and how they are recontextualized in a nationalist
protest against foreign others. In these weaponized internet memes, the mass, mediated by the netizens, delegitimize cultural elites as well, by capturing *jiong* facial expressions (shock, awkwardness, embarrassment, etc.) in constructing an image of irrationality and inelegance.

**The people as socially vulnerable groups**

*Socially vulnerable groups* (SVG) is the third meaning disentangled from *the people*. This categorization refers to those who are powerless in policy making, impoverished in terms of financial stability, and marginalized in society. Through a historical analysis of populist cases in China, SVG most often refers to workers and peasants, netizens, local people, students, doctors, and even prostitutes. In chapter four, we have demonstrated how netizens in particular show their allegiance with this group, demonstrated in how they express empathy for prostitutes who were caught up in investigations by corrupt elites. Through their populist articulation of discontent and anti-elite sentiment, netizens pitted these prostitutes as members of the SVG against established institutions. Similarly, in chapter five, we demonstrate how the affordances of digital media allow the people, covered by the semi-anonymous feature of the internet, becoming netizens, to position themselves in opposition to powerful, rich, privileged, and corrupt elites.

Through these case studies, it becomes clear how in cases of contemporary populism in China, netizens serve as the mediators for “the people,” revolting against the corrupt elite and the establishment through the affordances of online platforms that underpin online bottom-up populism. As both members of *the people* and as adept users of the digital platforms that enable discourses of populist sentiment, they are actively engaged in elevating public concerns and airing public discontent. The discursive power of SVG, similar to *the people*, rests on its’ relatively broad and dynamic features. It can also be framed as both an inclusive and exclusive concept. As a relatively inclusive concept, some rich elites can fall within the SVG when facing the powerful state apparatus and falling out of favour (for example, due to challenging the party). In contrast, as an exclusive concept, SVG particularly excludes political elites and those who are in power. In many cases, these political elites were removed from the party when it becomes untenable for the
authorities to keep them in power in the face of populist accusations of corruption or other misdeeds.

7.1.3 The discursive logics of populist online articulation

The third central argument of this research is that populist articulation follows specific discursive logics at different stages. Based on the discourse approach, research has explored the discursive construction of populism (De Cleen, 2019; Laclau, 2005). This thesis moves a step further, asking what discursive logics are followed and applied during the populist discourse articulation process. Despite the cumulative nature of populist discourse articulation, the process can be separated into several different stages. This stage separation is important not only for online bottom-up populist research in China, it also reflects processes found in offline social movement research globally. It aligns with the development processes of social movements, marked by beginning, development, climax, and retreat stages. By separating the development of populist discourse articulation into different stages, this research first contributes to revealing the discourse features in each stage. Second, it helps to identify what new antagonistic elements are articulated in each stage compared with the previous stage, thus enabling us to reveal the discourse polarization process. By dividing a populist social movement into different stages, we can further explore how populist discourse is articulated and what the discursive logic of each stage is. In chapter five, three discursive logics followed by populists online were identified through a case study of #DrivingIntoThePalaceMuseum.

Antagonism logic and “low level” affordances

The first of the discursive logics identified in this study was an antagonism logic, reflected in the articulation of social-cultural gaps between the “pure” people and the “corrupt” elite. An antagonism logic is the primary driving discursive logic applied at the initial stage of an online bottom-up populist case. Following this logic, socio-culturally embedded antagonistic elements are expressed through the low-level affordances of social media platforms, including by posting, sharing, liking, and linking. These low-level affordances are “typically located in the materiality of the medium, in specific features, buttons, screens, and platforms” (Bucher &
Antagonistic elements are shared, liked, and further spread to arouse public concerns and indignation. Identifying distinct antagonistic elements in each social-cultural setting, such as xenophobia, racism in Western Europe, and religion in the Middle East, contributes to revealing populist discourse polarization processes, particularly how populists combine these antagonistic elements to form a new arrangement of meanings.

**Polarization, depolarization and high-level affordances of constraining**

Understanding affordances in terms of the ways the technologies of the internet enable the expression of discontent while also constraining it, we then examined the high-level affordances of these platforms and revealed two interrelated but contrasting logics at play. Netizens’ expressions, enabled by social media technologies, first follow a *polarization logic* that broadens and deepens antagonistic gaps in the “people-elite” relationship through connective “human flesh searches,” and the dissemination of fake news and disinformation. Driven by this polarization logic, the mediators (netizens) consistently identify frontiers and expose new antagonistic elements to widen and deepen the existing societal gaps, further polarizing the social gaps. However, populist discourse polarization was handicapped when it triggered a censorship mechanism endemic to the Chinese internet, which depolarizes and mitigates the societal gaps. A further *depolarization logic* of the censorship mechanism, a logic followed by the state, is empowered by the high-level affordances of social media. This allows the state-apparatus to reshape the digital, emotional, and social ties of netizens by filtering, blocking, and deleting. The dynamics, afforded by the internet’s enabling and constraining, between polarization and depolarization, enable the discontents and pressure of China’s “social volcano” to be expressed in a controlled way. In this vein, the state-apparatus maintains social stability.

**A protest logic and logic of connective action**

Finally, a *protest logic* emerged, with users seeking common solutions to key social issues through “crowd-enabled connective action” on digital platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This brings together the “low level” and “high level” affordances of social media platforms which, in a networked society, are pivotal for online
expression, mobilization, and protest (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018). These have dramatically transformed the conventional logic of collective action “grounded in the organization-centered and leader-driven mode of resource mobilization” (Tai, 2022) to a logic of connective action in which “taking public action or contribution to a common good becomes an act of personal expression” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 752-753). Following a logic of connective action, the research here shows netizens connectively commenting on internet incidents by using political satire and engaging in a “symbolic carnival” (Fei, 2016, p. 34). In this way, they protest against perceived corrupt elites and further push established institutions to investigate internet incidents and fraudulent cases that arouse public attention, pushing them to manage these in an impartial and transparent way (Yang, 2014). However, due to the depolarization function of censorship mechanisms, internet incidents in China are often restricted online and limited to digital spaces, and normally do not expand to offline protests. As a response to online bottom-up populist protest, members of corrupt elites have often been punished for their misbehavior as a form of compensation for public discontent. As demonstrated in chapter five, the curator of the Palace Museum apologized to the public, and two senior managers were suspended for investigation. Portraying “culpable” elites as having been punished, this assuages public indignation and counteracts public desires for further online and offline protest. In addition, the public is educated to obey authority, participating in an internet culture where self-regulation and self-discipline are important, which further limits the possibilities of expanding an online protest to offline.

7.1.4 Populist visual communication in China

One particular feature of online bottom-up populist communication, as a form of discursive articulation explored in this thesis, is the weaponization of internet memes. This dynamic poses challenges for scholars as it moves research on populism from text-based materials, which can be assessed via traditional methods of research familiar to social science and political disciplines, towards visual-based internet memes, and a different set of methodologies. To make sense of memes within populist discursive articulation, a new approach to investigate how populist politics is formulated, negotiated, constructed, and shared through socio-culturally embedded visual semiotics on digital platforms was endeavoured. Chapter six
demonstrates that researchers can investigate how netizens connectively construct populist affinity with “the people” and an aversion towards the elite and the establishment through socio-culturally embedded visual semiotics of memes. Using a methodological framework that integrates multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) with a study of ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality (Wiggins, 2019), “weaponized” internet memes that were generated during three Diba Expeditions in 2016, 2018 and 2019 are studied. Three visual semiotics are identified in online bottom-up populist visual communication.

**Playful style of Jiong: heroic carnival**

Within the weaponized internet memes in our sample, the playful style of Jiong is the most frequently adopted visual semiotic. This style stems from the Chinese character “囧” (Chinese pronunciation, jiong), which was created to express “brightness” and “shining.” Since the shape of this character somewhat resembles a confused and embarrassed facial expression, Chinese netizens have adopted it as a way to convey feelings of irritation, shock, and awkwardness at two levels.

On the one hand, the playful style of Jiong is adopted by netizens to construct a self-mocking identity of Diaosi (屌丝), who are the underdogs of society without wealth or privileged backgrounds and with dim prospects of the future. This Diaosi image of the grassroots “people” is captured in the self-deprecating description of themselves as “short-ugly-poor” (穷矮矬, qiong-ai-cuo), which is in sharp contrast to the privileged upper echelon of the “tall-rich-handsome” (高富帅, gao-fu-shuai) and “fair-rich beautiful” (白富美, bai-fu-mei) elite, who are those with status, success, and bright futures.

On the other hand, the playful style of Jiong is also used by netizens to deconstruct and delegitimize the authority and power of political and cultural elites. At this level, it is found in memes which capture elites’ displaying awkward, embarrassed, and shocked facial expressions in photos. Through this parodic, playful style, an implicit criticism as well as hostility is expressed.

**Political iconography: Nostalgia to the glorious communist past**

Political iconography is the second visual semiotic identified in the study of
weaponized internet memes. This is used not only to delegitimize political systems and institutions in Taiwan, invoking the historic tensions between mainland China and independence movements in Taiwan, but also to demonstrate how netizens articulate a collective nostalgia for China’s glorious communist past as a social glue. This nostalgic evocation strongly echoes populists’ use of a nostalgic past seen around the world. However, it highlights, in doing so, where populist rhetoric also reflects nationalist fervor, interwoven in slogans including Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again,” Narendra Modi’s “Hindu Revival,” and Brexit’s “Take Back Control.” It is also reflected in Xi’s Chinese dream of the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” which Perry (2015) describes as a populist dream, and which also resonates with the rhetoric of populist-nationalist nostalgia found in the West.

Populist nostalgia, in particular, reflects “a specific form of collective memory practice that builds an emotional relationship with a glorified, yet lost, past” (Karakaya, 2020, p. 127). Chinese netizens’ use of political iconography acts similarly, and reflects a complex emotional relationship with China’s past. On the one hand, their use of political iconography is utilized as weapons which can be used to delegitimize the political system and institutions in Taiwan, being proud of the success of the communist path akin to a communist and nationalist articulation. On the other hand, the nostalgic evocation of communism in the 1960s is also used to demonstrates netizens’ dissatisfaction with the current reality of growing social inequality and the widening gap between the “short-ugly-poor” and the privileged upper echelon of “tall-rich-handsome” (高富帅, gao-fu-shuai) and “fair-rich beautiful” (白富美, bai-fu-mei). The usage of political iconography demonstrates the amorphousness between populism and nationalism. From the perspective of nationalism, iconography can be adopted to express netizens’ loyalty and patriotism to the nation. However, it can also be recontextualized to express a populist discontent with the social reality of a widening gap between the pure people and the corrupt elite.

**Colour: Loyalty to the “red” 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 often utilized by Chinese netizens in weaponized internet memes. In that context, they are used to demonstrate their collective commitment to “red” China. In comparison to other visual semiotics, colour is the semiotic resource that appears consistently in three expeditions. Furthermore, like iconography, it has the effect of echoing a nationalist appeal in the name of the Chinese nation. However, through a historical analysis of the internet memes, results demonstrate that, compared to 2016, internet memes used in 2018 and 2019 started to shift in the ways these semiotic resources are employed. Visual semiotic resources, such as the playful style of Jiong and political iconography were gradually used less and their satirical and parodic features were not widely used in 2018 and 2019. In contrast, colours (particularly “red”) was consistently and stridently used as nationalist symbolism, articulating a nationalist loyalty to “red” China. The shift in the ways these visual semiotic resources are used demonstrates that expressing loyalty to “red” China has become a political necessity. This change also shows that after years of nuanced control, censorship, and depolarization, the Chinese online space has gradually lost some of its protest potential, at least when it comes to internal issues.

7.2 Understanding online bottom-up populism in China

Mainstream populism research, particularly addressing populism in Europe and the Americas, has concentrated on populist leaders and populists parties as mediators of populism. As a result, this research has primarily addressed how populist leaders and parties appeal in the name of “the people,” and how they gain political power by challenging the power dynamics within representative democracies. This is often regarded as a top-down approach to understanding populism (Aslanidis, 2016; Meade, 2019). Where studies have sought to understand bottom-up populism, scholars have paid attention to populist social movements with distinct offline protest and movement features, such as the global Occupy movements, the Indignados movement in Spain, the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong, and Italy’s Five Star movement. In exploring populist mobilization and grassroots contention towards societal change (Aslanidis, 2016, 2017; De Nadal, 2021; Roberts, 2015), these studies have primarily contextualized bottom-up populism within democratic countries and contexts.
As this study has shown, populism in nondemocratic regimes, such as the party-state system found in China, differs in its manifestations. In the Chinese case, this is evident in its distinctive online bottom-up features. This unique feature not just makes China’s populism distinct, it also reshapes our modes of understanding populism, and introduces avenues for a conceptual realignment of populism research. In online bottom-up modes of populism, the people, covered by the semi-anonymous features of the internet, join together as an active community of netizens to express their voices, concerns, and even discontent online directly, raising concerns and discontent connectively. This online bottom-up feature found in populism is not only present in China, but also in global bottom-up social movements, such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and the Umbrella Movement.

This finding offers new ways of understanding populism globally, but also introduces new questions. For example, to what extent do active netizens represent “the people” when engaging in populist discourse, and to what extent does their expression of public opinion represent the general will of “the people,” or rather a narrower opinion of the active online public? Therefore, the key elements to understand online bottom-up populism are located in two dynamic relationships: (1) the technologically afforded netizens as mediators who blur the lines between the people and the elite; and (2) the dynamics between the general will and online public opinion.
7.2.1 The people and the netizens

In chapter four, the conceptual tensions around *the people* were introduced, clarifying how these manifest primarily along the vertical axis of power and the horizontal axis of inclusive and exclusive boundaries. From the perspective of power, democratic legitimacy and political power rest with the sovereign people, who should be the titular holders of societal power. In reality, the actual wielders of power are the corrupt elite, as populists alleged. This contradiction between those who should be in power and those who really are, is a core component of discursive power for populist mobilization. By invoking this contradiction, populists mobilize their followers by arguing that the contemporary democracies never truly represent the will of “the people.” Therefore, “the people” should exercise their power in a direct and unmediated way (Katsambekis, 2022). Regarding the horizontal axis of inclusive and exclusive boundaries, *the people*, when seen as an inclusive category, encompasses every individual within a political region. However, *the people*, when understood as an exclusive category, first and foremost refers to “the poor, underprivileged, and the excluded” (Agamben, 2000, p. 29). Privileged rulers, political elites, and the upper classes are typically excluded from *the people*.

The fluid boundary in the concept of *the people* is extended to the concept of the *netizens*, referring to the people who use the internet as “citizens of the Net” (Hauben & Hauben, 1997). According to the definition of *netizens*, the first difference between the two is that the concept of *the people* has a larger scope than that of *netizens*. *The people* as an inclusive concept, encompasses all individuals of a territory, regardless of age, gender, or any other demographic features. *Netizens*, however, only refers to those who have access to the internet and engage online. For instance, netizens in China account for 73.13% of the Chinese population until December 2022. This implies that the poor, uneducated, and rural citizens are not represented within the category of netizens. The larger scope of *the people* also means that appeals from netizens do not necessarily amount to appeals from the people. While these appeals may partly represent the voices of “the people” in online bottom-up populism, and might further position themselves as voices of “the people,” in reality it is likely a distorted impression of the overall will of the people. There is a risk that netizens’ appeals and discontent are not a reflection of the voices of the
people, but rather a reflection and distortion of a subset of interest groups that have the ability to sway online public opinion due to their advantages in social and cultural capital and their more active use of the internet.

The second distinction between *the people* and *netizens* is located in *power*. While the sovereign people legitimate democratic and political power, the concept of *netizens* does not carry a similar power dynamic. This is in part a reflection of history and ideology, where netizens do not carry the same historical legacy as the people in legitimating state power. It is complicated further, when netizens appeal against those in power as if they are the people, by referring to “the people” as those from the grassroots levels of society, excluding the rich and powerful elites. However, netizens is a category without clear and concrete boundaries. Given that the key criterion of belonging to this group is being active online, it is a group that is also open to privileged rulers, political elites, and upper classes alongside the wider public. This feature of *netizens* generates new concerns for understanding online bottom-up populism, and complicates understanding how and where netizens function as populist mediators, pitting “the people” against an elite that might very well be present in the same group of netizens.

Furthermore, *netizens* are distinguished from *the people* by their semi-anonymous characteristics, which allow netizens to comment and criticize in a way others cannot. As a result, netizens in China are more likely to be outwardly politically opinionated than Chinese people expressing their views offline (Lei, 2013). Compared to the people in China, netizens are also inclined to be more critical of the established institutions and political conditions and are more likely to engage in collective action and embrace democratic norms. From this critical point of view, netizens in China have constituted a new social force, challenging the status quo and promoting institutional changes. However, due to the semi-anonymous feature of the internet, which enables netizens (including various interest groups) to spread misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, with little direct cost, this ability may further polarize gaps in society, or work to lessen these. For instance, in chapter five, disinformation about the woman-driver’s rich background intended to polarize the gap between the poor and the rich. In other cases, we also see how the establishments potentially spread disinformation to mitigate social gaps, as in the
case of doctor Wenliang Li mentioned in chapter five. Therefore, the semi-anonymous feature of netizens is crucial for the understanding how discursive articulations of populism manifest, particularly in light of the spread of mis- and disinfection and conspiracy theories in a post-truth era (Giusti & Piras, 2020).

### 7.2.2 The general will and online public opinion

Clarifying the differences between the general will and online public opinion is the second nodal point to understanding online bottom-up populism in China. In China, the rise of the internet and online platforms has provided new venues for opinion expression (Dabatin, 2008). This, at least theoretically, enables the public to express their voices, concerns, and attitudes online, and also allows for dynamics of bottom-up agenda-setting to evolve (Polonski, 2018). At the same time, this raises new concerns for the understanding of China’s online bottom-up populism: does online public opinion represent the general will of the people? Or, to what extent does online public opinion represent the general will of the people?

From the perspective of definitions, the general will is distinguished from online public opinion in terms of the scope each encompasses. As explored in chapter one, the general will is not a simple sum of the will of all the people, but rather it is “the will all citizens have as members of the political society of the social compact” (Rawls, 2007, p. 224), which leads to common interests. Online public opinion struggles in similar ways in terms of scope, and representation of all citizens. While there are arguments these are autonomously formed through rational debate and deliberation, critical studies have argued that public opinion and (as an extension) online public opinion only represent the opinions of those who have access to this public sphere (a critique that predates the internet, as posed by Fraser, 1990). In particular, regarding online public opinion, it can be understood as only representing the opinion of those who have access to the internet. This differentiation has important implications for populist politics in China. Online public opinion may only partly reflect the will of the people because its formation is based on the online daily discussion of people who have access to the internet. Populist politics following online public opinion is enforced as a representation of the general will of “the people.” As a result, public opinion and online public opinion provide an important
reference point for populists to adjust their appeals and rhetoric, to position their discursive articulations of representing “the people” using public opinion as a proxy of general will, and in doing so to further strengthen the discursive power of populism.

The other difference between the general will and online public opinion is that the general will is absolute and leads to the common good (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16). However, online public opinion is not. The existence of multiple alternative online publics allow hyper-active users to make political appeals, express voices, and even allow discontent to be articulated based on personal interests and concerns. By aligning personal self-interests and private concerns with (or not with) public opinion, this may turn online public opinion into a reflection of the interests of a particular group rather than the general public. This is not only evidenced in China but also in democratic contexts where the wide spread of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories has a subtle influence on the formation of online public opinion, further polarizing social gaps by promoting or prolonging a sense of crisis (Pirro & Taggart, 2022). Despite of these differences, online public opinion is often regarded as a measure of general will since it reflects the opinion of the general public on social issues. Thus, populists regard online public opinion as a reflection or manifestation of general will (Silva, et al., 2018).

Figure 7.3 Online public opinion in China

In the context of China, due to the technologically afforded enabling and
constraining of digital platforms, online public opinion is a manifestation of the dynamics between public interests, populist interests, and governmental interests. On the one hand, the affordances of the internet enable the forming of a networked online public, which allows people to directly express their concerns and protest collectively online. However, populist interests can align with the public interests, and revolve against the corrupt elite and the establishment, which may trigger censorship mechanisms from the government that aim to constrain and depolarize populist discourse. Thus, online public opinion in an online bottom-up populist case often is not a direct reflection of public interests but a compromise of public interests, populist interests, and government interests. For instance, in chapter five, netizens appeal to investigate the incident of driving a car into the Palace Museum, which is a reflection of the opinion of the general public. Bottom-up populist interests aligned with public voices argued that the Palace Museum betrayed ordinary citizens and became a playground for the privileged, corrupt elite. However, the search by online populists for the background of the driver potentially threatened the interests of the CCP and the government which triggered the start of the censorship process.

7.3 Populism as a “pressure valve” for the Chinese “social volcano”

This thesis set out to answer why China’s state apparatus and political structure do remain inured to the rise of populism, despite the presence of a unique online bottom-up form of populism. This is in part a result and reflection of the distinct characteristics of Chinese populism, which (as argued above) differ in key ways from forms of populism found in democratic contexts. This thesis reveals three main reasons why the state apparatus seems to be somehow resilient to populism despite the presence of populism, proposing the concept of populism as a “pressure valve” to the Chinese “social volcano.” It moves our understanding of populism from focusing on its “pathological symptoms” (Canovan, 1999, p. 2), as threats or challenges to democracy, to a “pressure valve” metaphor for authoritarian regimes, such as China, to permit or engender populist discourse as a way to release social unrest, in a controlled and stabilizing manner.
7.3.1 Weakening the discursive power of online bottom-up populism by communist populism

First, the existence of communist populism assuages the discursive power of online bottom-up populism when it targets established institutions that are led by the communist party. This is in part structural, as the communist party governs 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). Since the founding of the CCP, it has regarded itself as the true representative of the people, appealing in the name of and speaking for the general will of the Chinese people. In communist populist discourse, it values and respects the ideas, concerns, and wisdom of the people. In the *Mass Line* discourse credited to Mao Zedong (1920s to 1970s), the slogan “from the masses, to the masses” is interpreted as a process of first investigating people’s conditions, learning about and engaging in their struggles, gathering ideas from them, and developing an action plan based on these ideas and concerns of the people. Similarly, the *Three Represents* discourse credited to Jiang Zemin (1990s to 2000s) and the *Rejuvenation* discourse credited to Xi Jinping (2010s-current), attempt to include as many people as possible, appealing in the name of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation. By positioning itself as presenting the people and governing in the name of the people, communist populism not only legitimizes and consolidates the authority of established institutions that are led by the CCP but also limits, through rhetoric, the possibility for online bottom-up populists to make appeals in the name of “the people.” In this way communist populism has, to some extent weakened, mitigated, and offset the discursive power of online bottom-up populism, when it appeals in the name of “the people” to protest against the elite and established institutions led by the CCP. In other words, the coexistence and balance between communist populism and online bottom-up thus functions to release the internal pressure of Chinese “social volcano.”

7.3.2 Depolarizing online bottom-up populist discourse through censorship mechanism

The operation of China’s political system is viewed 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” (Bell, 2016, p. 9) between local and central levels of government. This meritocratic political model, according to Chou, Moffitt, and Bryant (2020) has inbuilt resilience to the rise of populism and the potential impact it could have. This study demonstrates that, in addition to the model of political meritocracy, China’s media system also provides resilience to the challenge of populism.

The self-empowerment that social media afford (Shi & Yang, 2016), allowing the people covered by the semi-anonymous nature of the internet to express their voices and discontents, may potentially give rise to online bottom-up populism. This may further lead to a societal cleavage between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the underprivileged, the powerful and the powerless. However, the polarization that might result from discursive articulation of online bottom-up populism can in reality be considered as a pseudo-polarization. The same technological affordances also allow the government to implement strict censorship. This censorship mechanism, enabled by the high-level affordances of social media together with the awareness of offline repercussions for speech, depolarizes, and reshapes any antagonism between the people and the elite.

The censorship mechanisms from the government aim to “purify the cultural environment on the internet” (Xinhua News, 2009) through a combined means of top-down political and bottom-up cultural factors. The top-down political aspect of censorship measures takes shape through physical violence against activists who are perceived as threats when organizing offline or online activities, or when spreading disinformation that could exacerbate social gaps. The bottom-up cultural aspect of censorship seeks to engender a culture of self-regulation and self-discipline through social and cultural education movement, forming an awareness of “bounds” (Schroeder, 2021, p. 183).

Overall, the studies in this thesis show the dynamics between online bottom-up populist polarization and the government’s censorship mechanism of depolarization through the lens of low-level and high-level affordances of social media platforms. Online bottom-up populist articulation together with the operation of governmental
censorship function as a “pressure valve” for the Chinese “social volcano,” enabling pressure (voices, concerns, and discontent) to be released in a managed way. This new perspective makes an effort to explain China’s resistance to populism by demonstrating how a more subtle and indirect type of control is possible within the conflict between censorship and resistance.

7.3.3 Redirecting internal pressure towards external others

In China, online discourse on digital platforms can be considered contributing to the buildup of pressure in China’s “social volcano” and any groundswell of dissatisfaction with the status quo of society. However, in considering the resilience of the government and media systems to resist such pressure, attention is turned to how such pressure can be alleviated. As the study in chapter six demonstrates, this pressure is further released by redirecting public discontent away from internal social issues of inequality, abuse of power, and flaunting of privilege, and instead channeling the same emotional uproar towards external others. Specifically, these online protests are directed against corrupt elites within China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong, in this conceptualization) who are seen as betraying their Chinese identity and towards foreign others who threaten the Chinese nation. When this occurs, and in contrast to online populist speech against internal issues, these externally focused online campaigns are frequently praised, supported by the official media and by the government, using rhetoric that echoes “people v. elite” populist dynamics within a nationalist frame. For instance, and as shown in chapter six, Chinese official media, People’s Daily (2016), praised Diba netizens who organized online protests against pro-independent elites in Taiwan, as “good sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, who contribute to the Chinese dream of promoting the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Similarly, in 2019, the official Weibo account of Central Committee of the Communist Youth League posted “Tonight, belongs to #DibaNetizens#. Patriotic youth online expedition” (Sohu News, 2019). By portraying those who join the online protest as “patriotic youth,” institutions affiliated with the state not only mobilize but also redirect netizens’ attention to external issues, such as pro-independence elites in Taiwan and pro-independent movements in Hong Kong. This redirecting strategy recontextualizes a criticism with a populist stance towards internal issues into a nationalist protest against foreign others or
those who betray their Chinese identity. By recontextualizing populism in a nationalist context, the antagonism between “the people” and the elite in populism is mitigated and assuaged by the nationalist’s antagonism between the Chinese nation and others. This, to some extent, releases the internal pressure of China’s “social volcano” (Whyte, 2010).

7.4 Theoretical implications

This thesis has identified several distinctive characteristics of Chinese populism, such as the coexistence of communist populism and online bottom-up populism, the absence of charismatic leaders, and particular online features. It conceptualizes *communist populism* and *online bottom-up populism* to explain the populist phenomena in China. *Communist populism*, advocated by China’s communist party, refers to the party-state’s rhetorical evocation of the wisdom, identity, value, and revolutionary potential of the people as proletariat. This concept may also be applied to explain populist phenomena in similar communist or authoritarian contexts, investigating to what extent the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie found in communist rhetoric echoes the antagonism between “the people” and the elite found in populism. In particular, the emergence of online bottom-up populism reshapes our understanding of populism. In contrast to top-down populism in democratic contexts where charismatic leaders serve as the mediators between “the people” and the elite, in online bottom-up populism, the people use the internet to become citizens of the net (netizens), directly express their voices and concerns online. Netizens function as the mediator, pitting “the people” against the elite. As illuminated in this thesis, this offers further encouragement to the caution that scholars should avoid essentializing understandings of populism (De la Torre, 2010) by examining the unique dynamics of populism that exist within different political, cultural, and technological settings. Populism in China expands current knowledge of populism outside the contexts of elections or electable movements to center the discussion of the “people-elite” antagonism emerging in online spaces and where the outcomes of populist movements might not be new leadership, but rather other aspects of change.

By moving beyond a simplified dichotomy between “the people” and the elite, and advancing the idea of a “pressure valve” as a response to the populist “social
volcano” (Whyte, 2010), the thesis also provides a prism through which we can further explore the dynamic relationship between the people (self), elite (other), and the government. By disentangling the meanings attached to the people and reflecting the dynamic relationship of “people/elite” or “self/other” that are imagined in Chinese populist discourse, this study demonstrates that although online bottom-up populism in China enables ‘we the people’ to express their discontent and indignation toward those who are perceived as corrupt elites and towards those in established institutions, the existence of communist populism (chapter two) and the implementation of government censorship (chapter five) limits the extent to which expressions of online bottom-up populist discontent and indignation manifest beyond digital spaces. It thereby mitigates the gaps between “the people” and the elite, rich versus poor, privilege versus unprivileged, powerful versus powerless, and pure versus corrupt. This “pressure valve” function of online bottom-up populism results in a release of pressure within the Chinese “social volcano,” maintaining the stability of the Chinese society. This moves our understanding of populism from a challenge or a risk in democratic contexts to a tool of “pressure valve” in the party-state of China.

In chapter six, by analyzing the weaponized internet memes that were utilized during online bottom-up expedition movements, this study shows how populism in non-democratic contexts can be redirected towards external others when perceived as a risk to social stability. This allows us to rethink the convergence of populism and nationalism. Meanwhile, it also expands our knowledge of populism and the body of work devoted to understanding it by highlighting populists’ visual communication from a bottom-up perspective. This moves our understanding of populism from the mediators of charismatic leaders (such as Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Jair Bolsonaro) to the mediation done by netizens.

### 7.5 Avenues for future research

This thesis also raises a number of new questions. First, the coexistence of communist populism and online bottom-up populism needs further refinement and explanation. For instance, led by Marxism-Leninism, China aims to build “socialism and ultimately creating a truly egalitarian communist society” (Joseph, 2019, p. 13).
To achieve this truly egalitarian society, the party-state needs to close the gap between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. However, in contemporary China, there is a question as to what extent communist antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is similar to the antagonism between the people and the elite in populism, beyond the more surface-level parallels of majority (proletariat, the pure people) and minority (bourgeoisie, the corrupt elite). Furthermore, when do communism and online bottom-up populism cooperate with each other to revolt against others and when do they work against each other (e.g. when people appeal online for right-reserving to protest against the local government, communist party, and communist leaders)? In addition, from a global perspective, how is communist populism different from or similar to left-wing populism? Future research should try to find ways to compare these ideas, especially when it comes to communist regimes.

Second, while this research has remained mindful of a need to distinguish between people and netizens, as it does between public opinion and general will, future theoretical work could better establish these distinctions. Such concerns are relevant not only for understanding populism in China but also in other contexts, particularly in light of digitalization and platformization processes in contemporary societies. These processes have provided an unprecedented avenue for people to express their voices, to make appeals, and to air their discontent with those in power directly and collectively online. However, they also reinforce overlaps between the people and netizens, and between public opinion and the general will. This poses concerns for understanding which is which when trying to measure dynamics of populism, and prompts questions regarding the extent to which active netizens represent the people, and the extent to which public opinion represents the general will of the people. The answers to these questions can provide several insights not only into how bottom-up populism works but also how we think about expressions of ‘the people’ in wider contexts, and not only in China but around the world as well.

Third, future research can also be conducted to compare the similarities and differences between bottom-up and top-down populism, particularly in terms of the homogeneity of the people. According to Mudde’s influential definition of populism, the society will “be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic
groups” (2007, p. 23). To what extent do the people in different social-cultural contexts show homogeneous features? This kind of research will contribute to the understanding of transnational populism.

Methodologically, this study also provides a novel methodological approach to populism research by combining computer-assisted methods with traditional social-science methods to understand the ways populism manifests itself online. Taking the genre and size of the data into consideration, this new approach exploits the potential of the data set, increasing the validity as well as interpretability. Future research can apply this new method to investigate populist discourse polarization process on Sina Weibo and Twitter, where data often includes hashtags and posts.

The studies in this thesis have provided a multifaceted, systematic analysis of Chinese populism, which moves our understanding of populism from West to East, from top-down to bottom-up, and from offline to online. By moving beyond liberal democratic contexts to a party-state political system, as seen in China, and by enriching our understanding of populism through expanding from research on textual content to include visual internet memes, this thesis opens up several new avenues for research. Future research can be conducted based on the findings of this research to further investigate the characteristics of populism beyond democratic contexts, expanding our knowledge of populism as a truly global phenomenon.