Article

SM+S
social media + society

Social Media + Society
January-March 2024: 1–18

DOI: 10.1177/20563051241229659
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms
Sage

"It's All About US vs THEM!": Comparing Chinese Populist Discourses on Weibo and Twitter

Yuan Zhang[1] and Ralph Schroeder[2]

Abstract

The recent resurgence of populism has led to renewed interest in the phenomenon, but it remains unclear how this phenomenon has manifested itself in non-Western settings like China. This article analyses Chinese populism and provides a systematic categorization of online discourses related to this phenomenon, including ideas about "the people," "corrupt elites," and "enemies." The article is based on a collection of more than 100,000 Chinese online posts, collected from both Weibo and Twitter, that were classified as populist or not using natural language processing (NLP) models. We show how populism has manifested itself in Chinese online venues, and how populist discourses on Weibo and Twitter differ in topics, semantic content, and in who posts (agenda setters) and shares posts (audiences). The comparison demonstrates that different Chinese netizens take competing approaches to define the place of a rising China, and this also puts populism into the context of the peculiar Chinese way of rallying "the people" on behalf of the nation. Findings from this study contribute new insights into understanding populism in Chinese cyberspaces and provide a cross-platform perspective for understanding populist discourses in national and transnational contexts. The study also adds to computational methods in empirical research of populism in a comparative perspective.

Keywords

China, populism, Weibo, Twitter, natural language processing

Introduction

The role of nationalism in China has received much scholarly attention, but populism in China far less so. That is partly because it is hard to see how, in a country where criticism of the party state's elite is forbidden, anti-elite views could have a place. As we shall see, this problem can be overcome by identifying which elites are targeted in China for particular types of criticism. In this article, we follow Mudde's much-cited work with its three-part definition of populism: first, as anti-establishment or anti-elite, second, in favor of an exclusionary "people," and third, in seeking more representation of the "people's will" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). We argue that this definition fits the current rise of an exclusionary ultranationalism in China, which is directed against both foreign and domestic enemies and the elites who support them. Therefore, we conceptualize populism in China as the intersection between populism and ultranationalism, discussed further below. This type of populism can be found in China and Chinese communities abroad on social media, where it takes different forms depending on who posts and what they post.

China has seen a recent increase in animosity directed at foreigners, Westerners, and pro-Western Chinese intellectuals and political elites (Lehman-Ludwig et al., 2023; Mattingly & Yao, 2020; Tai, 2015). One example of this animosity is directed against the exceptional treatment that foreigners enjoy, which is referred to as "super-national treatment" in Chinese online slang (Wei, 2010). One instance occurred in April 2022, at a time when the COVID pandemic surged in Shanghai, and the Global Education Centre of East China Normal University organized a birthday celebration

[1]University of Zurich, Switzerland
[2]University of Oxford, UK

Corresponding Author:
Yuan Zhang, University of Zurich, Andreasstrasse 15, Zurich 8050, Switzerland.
Email: y.zhang@ikmz.uzh.ch

for three foreign students. At the time, Shanghai was under lockdown, and there was a food shortage affecting all of the city's residents. Millions of Chinese online users expressed their outrage at the university's behavior, questioning why foreigners could enjoy the privilege of celebrating their birthdays while local students were still under quarantine and hungry. There are other instances that raised social media debate, for example, when foreigners have been permitted to contravene pandemic prevention measures, including walking their dogs or refusing to wear masks, which went unpunished while Chinese citizens faced harsh penalties. An online joke that went around said that all you have to do to avoid quarantine control is pretend to be a foreigner.

Not only foreigners but also domestic pro-Westerners have been the subject of aggression. Pro-Western intellectuals were considered as "betrayers" of the people's will on Chinese social media. Indeed, in Chinese online culture, the term "public intellectual" is often used in a disparaging way to refer to those with academic credentials or intellectuals who subscribe to pro-Western beliefs which are seen as remote from the views of the common people (Jiang & Esarey, 2018). When Fang Fang, a Chinese writer, published a diary to document the misery in Wuhan when COVID-19 had just begun in China, millions of Chinese thought Fang Fang was betraying them and wrongly denigrating China, and she was seen as a pro-Western shill.

Identifying populism in a one-party system like China is difficult: The existing political establishment cannot be easily challenged by populists, and the level of the tolerance of populist resentment is low in China's political culture. But this seeming contradiction also allows us to point to exceptions, as when some elites are criticized by others: One example was the campaign by Bo Xilai, a former Central Committee Politburo member of the communist party of China (CPC), who led a "red" faction and mobilized the public against more "liberalizing" elite factions in the early 2000s. Bo was seen as a contender for the party leadership, but he was ousted and imprisoned due to a corruption scandal even though he mobilized the grassroots on behalf of his "red" campaign and his leadership aspirations enjoyed considerable popular support. Since the Internet leaves more scope for greater free expression than state-controlled official media, it can be expected that such populist support can be found online—if anywhere (G. Yang, 2009). In this study, two platforms—Weibo and Twitter, where such sentiments can be found—were selected as comparative cases since they differ in their user bases, affordances, and focus in different ways on domestic as against international issues.

The article is organized as follows. After a literature review about populism and technological development, the article moves to a discussion of how populism can be conceptualized in the Chinese political context and its online manifestations. The article then describes the data collection before it moves to a comparison of populist discourses on Weibo and Twitter. Once the findings have been presented, the article draws out broader conclusions for the study of populism and of Chinese politics.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing populism has changed over time even if not in a straightforwardly chronological order and includes a conceptual approach (Allcock, 1971; Laclau, 1977/2012; Mudde, 2004, 2017), a phenomenological approach (Canovan, 1982), and more recently quantitative analysis (Di Cocco & Monechi, 2022; Huguet-Cabot et al., 2021). The conceptual approach aims to provide a general theoretical model for all forms of populism. However, such a model has always been criticized for failing to encompass some types of populism and for including false positive cases (Canovan, 1982). There was no widely agreed-upon theoretical model for populism until Mudde (2004, see also Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) who defined populism as a (thin) ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." However, this definition remains broad in scope and lacks explanatory power for real-world phenomena. For instance, it does not address questions such as which other ideologies can be combined with populism, who are considered enemies of "the people," and who are "the people" in different political–cultural contexts? In the case of China, moreover, as we shall see, and in the absence of direct criticism of party state's elites, it is necessary to identify particular "corrupt" or "traitorous" elites; "traitorous" because they align with domestic pro-Western sentiment that is seen as alien to the Chinese national culture of "the people."

Although some scholars propose the approach of a phenomenological typology to address the increasing varieties of populism (e.g., Peasant Populism, Reactionary Populism, and Politicians' Populism in Canovan, 1982; grassroots populism in Aslanidis, 2017), achieving a universal understanding of populism remains challenging. Quantitative analysis of populist discourses using computational methods presents a novel opportunity, which is facilitated by the availability of massive social media data and natural language processing (NLP) applications (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). The advantage of quantitative analysis or big data approaches is that they allow scholars to explore both the overarching and the fine-grained aspects of populism. In other words, texts can be collected that fit the universal definition of populism while also providing descriptive explanations for differences in certain aspects such as topics, semantics, and protagonists.

In recent years, computational social scientists have started to measure populism in online discourses using widely accepted theoretical definitions. For instance, following Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as an ideology, Huguet-Cabot et al. (2021) employed NLP techniques, specifically the robustly optimized bidirectional encoder representations from transformers (BERT) pretraining approach (RoBERTa), to calculate populist sentiment scores among

Reddit users. Ziolkowski (2021) utilized sentence embeddings to gauge anti-elite content in speeches from the 2016 US presidential election. Di Cocco and Monechi (2022), in contrast, focused on the "supply side" of populist texts, examining 268 electoral manifestos from 99 parties worldwide, viewing populism as a strategic approach (Weyland, 2001). Although some authors have acknowledged the need for stronger model evaluation, they have demonstrated the potential of automated populism detection across a wide range of texts.

However, these attempts are rare, and to the best of our knowledge, none has provided cross-platform comparisons or examined populism in China. This study systematically categorizes and analyzes Chinese populist discourses using computational approaches.

Characteristics of Populism in China

While most researchers regard populism as a threat to democracy, there is also a school of thought about populism that regards it as beneficial: that is because democracy itself should be regarded as agonistic, with "the people" making rightful claims on political elites (Mouffe, 2018). There are echoes of this Marxist approach in the Confucian political tradition whereby the legitimate ruler is always subject to the "rightful" approval of their subjects (Bell, 2010), as well as the Maoist tradition whereby "the masses" are constantly being mobilized in support of the party state (Tang, 2016). Furthermore, as we shall see, in the context of the Chinese party state, it is not just establishment elites that are corrupt or remote from "the people" and that can be targeted for criticism, but Chinese populism has shifted to target outsiders like foreigners (often not foreigners per se, but those who support foreign ideas or culture). Hence, domestic support for Westerner-supporting elites can also be tainted as being unpatriotic, as well as targeting immigrants or a domestic "third column" with insufficient loyalty to the nation. Thus, populism in China is characterized by targeting both political elites and foreign or domestic enemies and driven by bottom-up forces (see also Miao, 2020).

The problem that any direct criticism of the party-state elite in China is quashed can be avoided if it can be shown that the aim of anti-elitism in this case is not to remove those in power (arguably, that is also the case with populism elsewhere: it is often "negative" without a constructive political agenda)—but rather to rectify or steer the position of existing elites toward a different position that corresponds more closely with "the people" (Morisi & Wagner, 2021). Furthermore, this alternative does not need to be expressed at the ballot box but rather can be expressed by rival elites claiming to represent the peoples' will more strongly. The Chinese government has, of course, claimed to be democratic throughout its period of rule, seeing the party state as an embodiment of the peoples' will. To this misrepresentation, we can add that the Chinese government is nevertheless not unitary: while the national government is controlled by the party and has control over all levels of government and so is also accountable, in theory, to the people, there are elites within the government at the national or at more regional levels or promoting particular policies that can be criticized.

There is one more distinctive element to China's populism which is similarly a variant of populisms elsewhere: Since the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a move toward a market-based economy. These reforms have also led to growing inequality between the rich and the poor, the increasing prominence of economic elites, and a growing number of foreign businesspeople as China opens up to the global market. China's strong economic performance in recent decades has, therefore, brought a resurgence of nationalist assertion, summed up as "rightful rise" (Miller, 2021). But there are also different types of nationalistic fervor: S. Zhao (2004; see also Schroeder, 2021; T. Yang & Fang, 2023) has given an account of these types and argues that the strongest version is "ultranationalism," a type of nationalism directed against foreign or domestic enemies and which fits the exclusionary nature of populism, conceiving "the people" as not fully represented by those who are not members of the "pure people." Nationalism or patriotism generally is based on a sense of common belonging to a cultural or political identity without needing "enemies," but it is ultranationalist only if it is exclusionary toward "others." Thus, there is an overlap between ultranationalism and populism: when both are oriented against elites, either domestic or foreign, who are not exclusionary enough against "others" and so prevent the sovereignty of "the people." Note that this overlap does not exhaust ultranationalism, which could be exclusionist against "others" without being anti-elite. Nor does populism have to be ultranationalist, as with leftist populism that only wants less power for rich globalist domestic economic elites and is not otherwise anti-foreigner. Still, it is the overlap between populism and ultranationalism that interests us for the Chinese case since it offers a solution to how populism can exist in a society where it is next to impossible to criticize the party state, and we will come back to this in the conclusion.

Another aspect of populism is the popular acclaim for strong leaders that is often found in the media appeals of populists. Examples include Donald Trump, Hugo Chávez, and Narendra Modi (Moffitt, 2016). But not all populist parties have such strong leaders, as shown by German and Swedish populist parties (Jungherr et al., 2019; Schroeder, 2020). In any event, China's populists, even without party or leader competition, should also be found among the grassroots or those claiming to speak on their behalf (He, 2023).

Furthermore, Chinese populism, as elsewhere and as already mentioned, comes in both right-wing (anti-political elites, and anti-outsiders domestically and externally) and left-wing (anti-globalist economic elites, and anti-domestically and externally threatening economic forces) forms. This article focuses on the right-wing form which is underpinned

by China's nationalist culture. This nationalist culture had not fully emerged prior to the 20th century in China, when Confucianism provided a common Chinese culture, though Confucian political values were based on the obligation and accountability of the emperor toward citizens. According to the "family-nation" (家国) concept developed during the Han dynasty, the country's ruler should look out for its citizens, a reciprocal duty which also encourages individuals to put their country above individual interests (T. Zhao, 2008). Chinese nationalism took a strong anti-colonial turn in the 20th century and anti-imperialist turn during the war with Japan in World War II and has sometimes also taken the form of Han chauvinism (Carrico, 2017). Chinese populist ultranationalism, however, is more recent still, and specifically targets foreigners and pro-Western public intellectuals. Such a strong negative sentiment against foreign "others" partly draws on collective memories of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism in China. It has recently deepened as China faces diplomatic and political conflicts with the West as with the escalating China–US trade war.

The Rise of Social Media and Online Populism

What of the presence of Chinese populism online? He's (2023) dissertation constitutes the most extensive treatment of China's online populism to date, especially since he stresses, as we do, how its bottom-up nature in China distinguishes it from Western populisms. He analyses populism in various online channels, arguing that it constitutes a "pressure valve" which allows nationalist steam to be blown off, even if in a controlled manner due to censorship. C. Zhang (2020) shows, by analyzing posts on Zhihu (an online Chinese question and answer site like Quora), that Chinese populism has, in recent years, particularly crystallized around an anti-Western stance, a stance against what is seen as a "white left" (which is regarded as excessively progressive or multicultural) in the West and a stance that seeks to re-assert China's position in the global order.

C. Zhang (2022) has recently added to this picture in the wake of COVID-19, charting the "positive energy" mobilized online against the West, especially as China and the United States engaged in mutual blaming about the virus, and promoted what was seen as a more helpful Chinese response to the disaster as a challenge to American geopolitical hegemony. The populism and ultranationalism we analyze here could also be conceptualized differently, for example, as comparable to the transnational global "alt-right." That comparison is what T. Yang and Fang (2023) did in their study of "alt-right" communities on Weibo. Their study shows how the alt-right on Weibo is both transnational but also has distinctive Chinese characteristics, and it has some common themes with the topics that will be discussed here (calls for stronger assertions of nationalism) but also different themes such as anti-feminism and Islamophobia. Along similar lines, Miao has shown how, on Zhihu, an insecure middle class in China (Zhihu users are mainly well-educated and well-off) identifies with Trump's populist campaigning, pitting "the people as underdogs" against elites.

Huang (2023) likewise examined populist and misogynist nationalism by analyzing Sina Weibo comments, WeChat public account articles, and also news articles from state-run media. She focused on several high-profile controversies whereby academic women were accused, in misogynistic ways, of being traitors to their country. Their elite academic status was disparaged by "the people" online, though this anti-elitist tone was not taken by state media which focused on the "ungrateful traitors" when they reported on the controversies. Gender and nationalism have been entwined for some time, as Fang and Repnikova (2018) showed in their account of the so-called "Little Pinks," a meme war that took place when mainland Chinese netizens generated controversy about the Taiwanese 2016 election results in various online channels.

China's state control makes offline demonstrations difficult. But online, populism has often found ways to circumvent traditional gatekeepers (Gerbaudo, 2017; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021), and online expression has also been a powerful means of protest and policy change in China, including among influential online figures espousing populism (Tai, 2015). Some media channels that are partly outside of the control of the Chinese government (like Twitter) can also be more critical than others. For instance, criticisms of the party are prohibited on domestic media platforms, while they can flow freely on overseas platforms. Yet despite the valuable efforts of previous studies in conceptualizing the dichotomy between the pure people and the corrupt elite (including foreign or domestic enemies) in China, there is still a lack of pinpointing these enemies and quantitatively analyzing them with empirical data.

We do this by analyzing Weibo, which is the largest social media platform and political news source that allows the circulation of both government propaganda and relatively open discussion among Chinese netizens. By 2022, it had 586 million monthly active users and 252 million daily active users. "Hot" (trending) topics are categorized into Important News, Entertainment News, and Friends Search. The most recent alteration to Weibo was made in 2021 when a new section of political propaganda was added to the list of popular topics. After this change, Weibo saw a steep fall in entertainment and a rise in official political news.

We also analyze Twitter, which has been banned in China since 2009. However, it is still popularly used by many Chinese people who live abroad or in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, or by Mainland Chinese users via illegal use of virtual private network (VPN), which is widespread among tech-savvy users. Many Chinese official media such as China central television (CCTV), Global Times, Xinhua Agency, and People's Daily have created Twitter accounts to increase China's influence overseas. Nevertheless, the Chinese communities on the two platforms show distinct cultures and

may thus promote populism in different ways. As Matassi and Boczkowski (2023) argue, comparisons between countries and media and platforms—in our case, platforms—advance importantly beyond current research which is mostly limited to single cases. Comparisons allow researchers to examine the heterogeneity of online spaces, which is particularly important in the case of China which is often seen as a homogeneous space.

In terms of this comparison, first, the two platforms originate in countries with different political and media systems and may thus focus on different political topics. Weibo is part of a system where there is limited media autonomy or democratic competition (Roberts, 2018), although there is a vibrant commercial media environment and journalists also push the boundaries on official state media (Zhu, 2012). Recently, with the digitization of journalism, the state's role in investing in news media has become even more complicated (Fang & Repnikova, 2022). In China, however, online channels provide some degree, within strict boundaries, of critical expression, and cyberspace, as Han (2018) has documented, remains contested among a variety of groups. Twitter, in contrast, is a US-based company, and its users are mainly based in countries with media autonomy and democratic government. Furthermore, Twitter can produce more diverse content than Weibo because it is not restricted by the official guidelines on political information creation and circulation in China. According to Gao et al. (2012), "in contrast to Twitter, users on Sina Weibo avoid talking about organizations such as political parties or other institutions."

Second, the two platforms have different affordances (see Hutchby, 2000, pp. 13–33), which may explain their differences in collective semantic content. Although both platforms feature trending topics, Weibo emphasizes "hot events" (trending topics) while Twitter is more hashtag based. Both feature automated ways to relate to followerships which users can build on by commenting on the topic or event. But searching for topics is less user-friendly on Twitter since the comments of others do not show directly in the timeline of the original posts. The retweet function of Weibo is also more accessible than on Twitter; new content can be added to the retweeted content, and this content can also be posted simultaneously in the comment area on Weibo. Retweets on Twitter cannot add content. Overall, Weibo has more user-friendly interaction functions which may lead to following topics collectively while Twitter is geared more to individualized audiences.

Third, the characteristics of Chinese users on Weibo and Twitter are different. Weibo users are mostly grassroots users who mainly live within Mainland China. Chinese-speaking Twitter users are likely to live abroad and are more likely to have extensive exposure to Western culture. Both Weibo and Twitter have many official government accounts, journalist accounts, accounts of various types of professionals, and what in China is called we-media (accounts with many followers, which on Weibo must be officially registered). One question is thus: who sets the populist agenda and who are the audiences on both platforms? Unlike in Western democracies, the Chinese government accounts on both platforms are likely to promote patriotism and party ideology, but the content posted by official accounts is less populist because there is a need for a diplomatic and official tone and, without party competition, criticisms will mainly (though not exclusively) come from non-official accounts. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the grassroots will be the primary producers of populist content on Weibo and Twitter. Still, we will need to examine different types of users (though, to anticipate, it is a limitation of this research that user characteristics can only be identified to a limited extent or indirectly, as explained below). We will thus be able to observe how the two platforms provide mirrors of different forms of Chinese populism.

These differences between the two platforms, and how they yield important insights into the nature of Chinese populism, motivate our research questions. There has been a debate about how populism may bring progressive or retrogressive change in democracies, depending on the changes sought by its supporters. For China, as we have seen, it may not be possible to criticize and seek change from the government directly, but which elites are criticized and which enemies targeted online can provide an understanding of the role of populism. To arrive at such an understanding, it will be necessary to establish the differences in online content among the user groups of the two platforms. These considerations lead us to explore three research questions (RQs): How do (RQ1) topics, (RQ2) semantic content, and (RQ3) the main agenda setters and audiences of Chinese populism differ on Sina Weibo and Twitter?

Data and Methods

Data Collection

Data from Weibo and Twitter were collected in three steps: First, there was an initial Weibo collection combing recent trending ("hot") topics and events connected to populism. Based on the enemies targeted—foreigners, Westerners, public intellectuals, and political elites, three popular events were chosen for each category (see Table 1 in the supplemental materials). In 2022, there was a surge of critical outpouring in Chinese online spaces due to the implementation of pandemic lockdown policies, the outbreak of the Russia–Ukrainian war, intensifying United States–China tensions and other issues. Hence, we chose to examine prominent events primarily from this year, as they were likely to contain populist discourses targeting various external and internal enemies, as discussed above. Second, keywords were selected from these "hot events," and they were coded (a coding scheme, focusing on keywords related to populist and non-populist content, is available upon request from the authors) into populist or non-populist related. Those related

Table 1. Performance Comparison Among Three Text Classification Models.

Model	RoBERTa + Logistic Regression (%)	BERT + Logistic Regression (%)	FastText + Logistic Regression (%)
Accuracy (Weibo)	86.00	85.00	78.90
Accuracy (Twitter)	92.00	91.90	90.60

Note. All models were implemented with multiple neural network layers but there was little difference when increasing the number of layers.

to populism were ranked and extracted based on their term frequency–inverse document frequency (TF–IDF) score. Then, apart from four enemy-oriented keywords, we generated an additional category for "the people" from the frequent keywords, which made for two groups (people-oriented vs. enemy-oriented) of keywords that match Mudde's definition and potentially foster populist discussions. It can be noted that keywords were only extracted from Weibo events because Twitter has no ranked lists of trending topics in China. Third, a second round of data collection was conducted using keyword searches on Weibo and Twitter to extract the complete data sets around "the people" and four types of "enemies" (1–31 May 2022), yielding 241,920 Weibo posts and 560,770 Twitter posts. Finally, 50,000 posts were randomly selected from each platform for the purpose of analysis due to limitations of computational power. It can be mentioned that the precise data collection period was limited by the fact that 1 month was deemed to be sufficient to provide a tractably sized data set (which, as mentioned, had to be reduced).

Categorization of Account Types and Manual Coding of Training Data set

We also sought to identify the characteristics of users of the platforms. First, for the account types, we classified account types on Weibo as journalism, public sector, professionals, we-media, and individuals. On Twitter, accounts were only classified as journalism, we-media, and individuals because public sector accounts are mainly used for diplomatic purposes, and there are few professionals from Mainland China who use Twitter. Accounts belonging to journalism, public sector, and professionals can be identified by their username suffixes and we-media accounts if they achieve certain threshold of followers. It should be noted that we use "we-media" here in a pragmatic way and as a cutoff (on Twitter, there is no such label). Most users, the "long tail," on both Twitter and Weibo have very few followers and so little influence (Kwak et al., 2010). Yet those within the top 10% in terms of the number of followers can be assumed to have significant online influence, hence our use of "we-media" (see Figure 1 in the supplemental materials). The remaining accounts were identified as individual accounts (see detailed criteria of how we identified different types of accounts in Table 2 in the supplemental materials).

We were also interested in identifying users who proactively initiated public discourses related to populism and ultranationalism, as well as users who passively consumed populist content. Users who created original posts were identified as agenda setters, and users who reposted messages from others were labeled as audiences.

Finally, 20% of the 100,000 posts were selected for manual labeling by five coders into either populist or non-populist content. Before the formal annotation, the five coders assessed the reliability and validity of the annotation by coding "agree," "disagree," and "don't know" with regard to authors' labels. Agreement ranged from 76.56% to 95.84% for the "hot event" data set, 80.70% to 98.30% for the full Weibo data set, and 82.50% to 99.50% for the full Twitter data set. Cohen's kappa coefficients in Table 3 in the supplemental materials show that there was moderate or high consistency with the labels, but where intercoder agreement was low, there were further checks for validity (see Table 4 in the supplemental materials) by manual inspection of the reasons for the discrepancy. The 20,000 labeled posts were then, in a final step, analyzed with deep learning classifiers for training to be able to classify the remaining data.

The prepared data sets were first preprocessed by removing URL, usernames, and less informative stop words from the raw texts. The NLP methods automatically classified the remaining 80,000 posts into populist or non-populist using trained deep learning classifiers. The language model used was RoBERTa, a variant of BERT that is recognized as state of the art and was trained on very large language corpora. As mentioned, in populism research, there are yet few applications of machine learning models (i.e., Di Cocco & Monechi, 2022; Huguet-Cabot et al., 2021), and none in the Chinese context. In 2019, a Chinese developer published the first Chinese RoBERTa pretrained model, which was trained on a Chinese corpus including News, Question and Answer, and Encyclopedia data.[1] It outperformed other BERT models in most performance tests. This article applied this model to our populism data sets.

Identifying Potential Topics in Populist Discourses on Weibo and Twitter

Having classified the whole data sets into populist posts and non-populist posts, we were also interested in what topics people cared about when engaging in populist discussions. Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) was used to measure the potential topics covered in the populist posts as it is easily implemented and has been extensively applied in social sciences (e.g., Maier et al., 2018). We determined the number

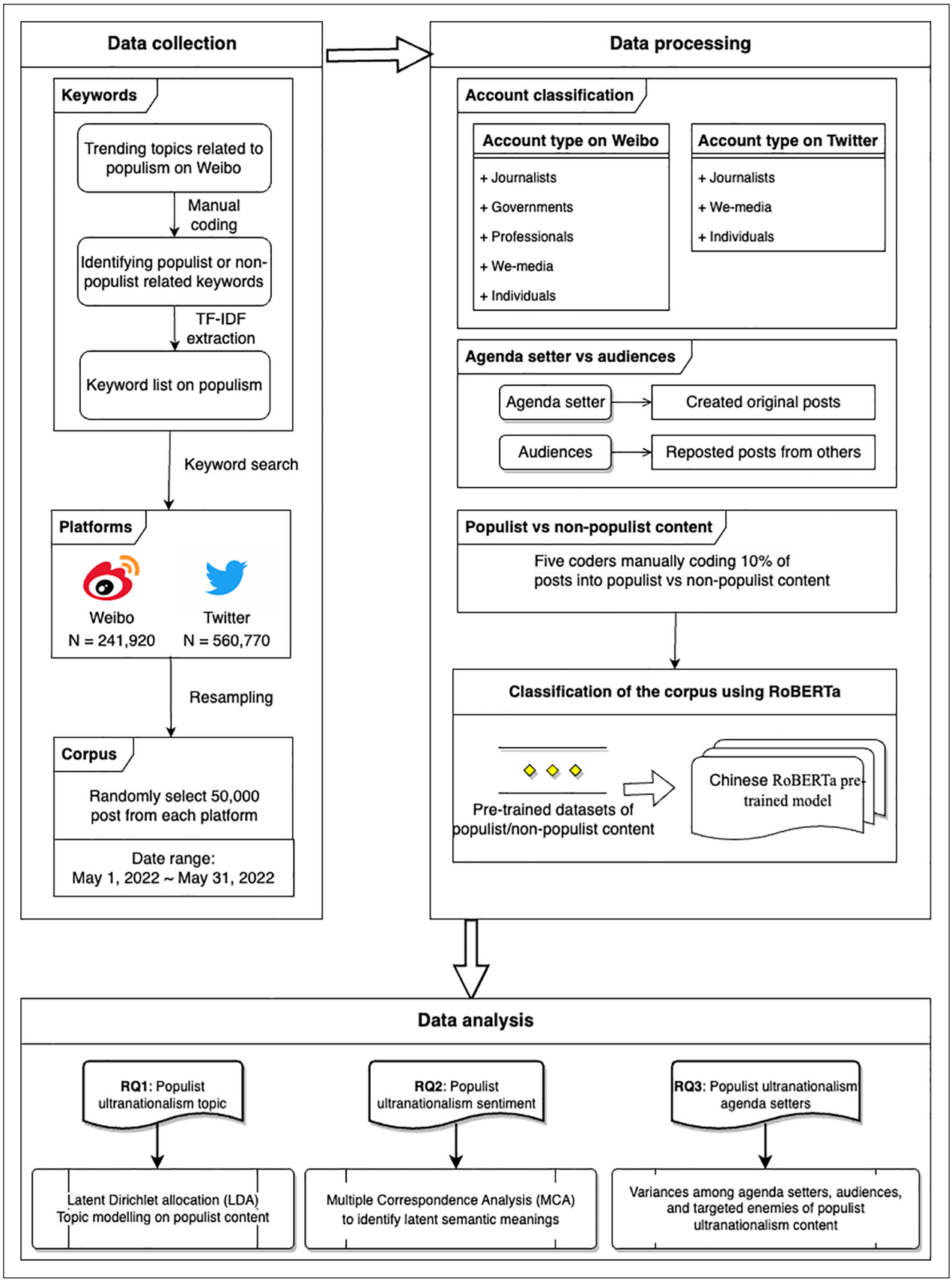

Figure 1. Flowchart of data collection, processing, and analysis.

of topics by combining the extrinsic evaluation metrics provided by Röder et al. (2015) and human judgment (see Figure 2 in the supplemental materials). To investigate whether some populist posts reveal latent semantic meanings such as values and ideologies, the correlations between platforms, targeted groups, and topics in low-dimension space were checked by using multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). The distance among topics and targeted groups showed the populist semantic discrepancy across platforms. This will allow the dynamic flow of populist and non-populist information among participants and audiences to be visualized below. Figure 1 shows a flowchart of data collection, processing, and analysis.

Results

Classification of Populist and Non-populist Content on Weibo and Twitter

The classification task of 10,000 labeled posts and 40,000 unlabelled posts from each platform was arrived at by dividing the 10,000 labeled posts into a training data set (80%) plus a sample data set (10%) and the test set (10%). Three NLP models were trained on the training data, adjusted with the sample set, and validated with the test set. The performance of the RoBERTa model is shown in Table 1 with an accuracy of 86.0% on Weibo data and 92% on Twitter data. The performance of RoBERTa is somewhat higher than base BERT but both BERT family models clearly outperform FastText.

Then, labels were obtained for 100,000 posts in the full data sets with 14.66% populist posts in the Weibo set and 8.43% populist posts in the Twitter set. This allows comparison of the proportion of populist content in each category on Weibo and Twitter (see Figure 2). The "intellectual" category for both platforms has the largest percentages of populist content followed by the "foreigner" category. On Weibo, however, the proportions of the two groups are almost twice as high as on Twitter. "Elite" and "people" are where the disparity in rankings between the two platforms can be found most clearly, with Weibo having more populist content aimed against immoral elites and comparatively less people-oriented content while for Twitter it is the other way around. "Western" has the same rank on both platforms but the populist content accounts for a larger percentage of the posts in that category on Weibo.

Topic Distributions of Populism on Weibo and Twitter

The topics compared in this section are neither events as such nor hashtags but rather more abstract ideas. We then applied LDA, a topic modeling technique to identify latent topics and underlying themes can be extracted from among the posts that are labeled populist. This topic extraction method uses the probability distribution of words (Blei & Lafferty, 2006) and, after modeling the topics for each category, the themes for each platform can be assembled after removal of repeated topics. The name for each topic can be assigned by selecting common words plus specific examples (see Figure 3 and Table 2). Finally, seven populist topics on Twitter and eight on Weibo are summarized (Figure 4).

Four Semantic Dimensions of Populism on Weibo and Twitter

The semantic content of populism can be roughly checked based on the low-dimensional Euclidean space among variables on the two platforms. Because all we have are

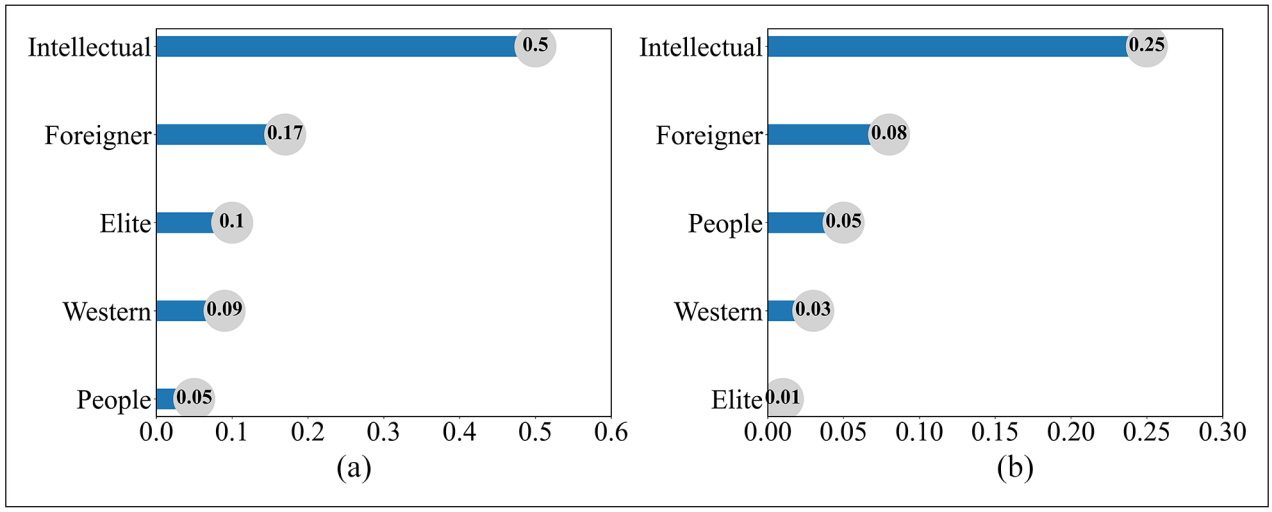

Figure 2. Proportion of populist posts by group on (a) Weibo and (b) Twitter.

Figure 3. Top-10 words of different topics by group on Weibo (top) and Twitter (bottom).

categorical variables, an MCA was used for correlations (see Figure 5) with the parameters of the MCA in Table 3 (the variation in the variables is explained by 13.3% in the first dimension and 12.2% in the second). It can be clearly seen that each targeted group is surrounded by its relevant topics: "People" is related to topics such as "democracy," "party," "popular sovereignty," and "human rights"; "elite" is related to "corruption" and "accountability"; "Western" is

Table 2. Examples of Populist Topics on the Two Platforms.

Topic	Platform	Example posts
Corruption	Weibo, Twitter	*"The worms that harm the interests of the party and the people must be punished"*
Betrayal	Weibo, Twitter	*"Are the people in Ministry of Education all foreigners or minions of foreigners?"*
Super-national treatment	Weibo, Twitter	*"#China Southern Airlines only opens direct flights to British people# It's so fucking disgusting"*
Immoral West	Weibo, Twitter	*"Be wary of the 'infiltration' and 'mutation' of culture in our country by the United States and the West, and be wary of a new type of 'peaceful evolution'"*
Popular sovereignty	Weibo	*"If the criticism from the people cannot be tolerated, the distance between the party and the people will grow wider and wider"*
Human rights	Weibo	*"If the human life cannot be protected, the national rejuvenation will be impossible"*
Accountability	Weibo	*"It is the responsibility and obligation of the party and the government to do everything possible to solve problems for the masses"*
Cultural invasion	Weibo	*"Our country's education must not be infiltrated by foreigners, it's horrible"*
Democracy	Twitter	*"America is no longer a democracy, it doesn't have any of what you said"*
Liberal democracy	Twitter	*"The people must retain the right to resist"*
Party	Twitter	*"The party should also fulfill its promise to the people"*

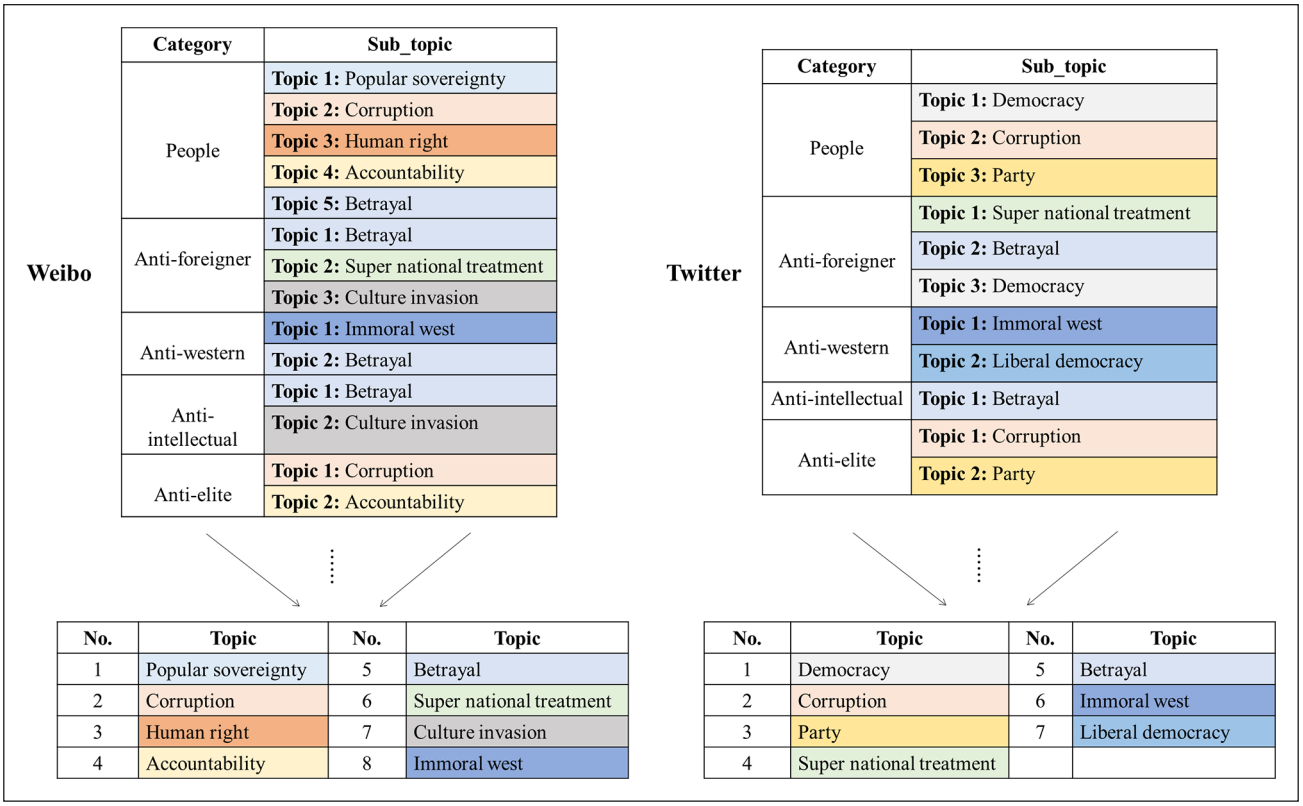

Figure 4. Topics of populist posts by group on Weibo (left) and Twitter (right).

surrounded by "liberal democracy," "culture invasion," and "Immoral West"; "foreigner" often refers to the topic "super-national treatment," and "public intellectual" is most connected to "Betrayal."

The first dimension can be seen on a destructive–constructive scale. On the left, topics related to foreigners, public intellectuals, and Western are shown to indicate a strong tendency of exclusion or antagonism. Topics about people and elites are critical of the performance of government officials but mostly constructive, and positive. Both Weibo and Twitter mostly contain destructive rhetoric; in terms of constructive rhetoric, Twitter focuses on people-oriented rhetoric whereas Weibo targets political elites. The second dimension reflects the populist–ultranationalist scale. While these are often entwined in the Chinese context, there is still a difference in emphasis: topics related to people and

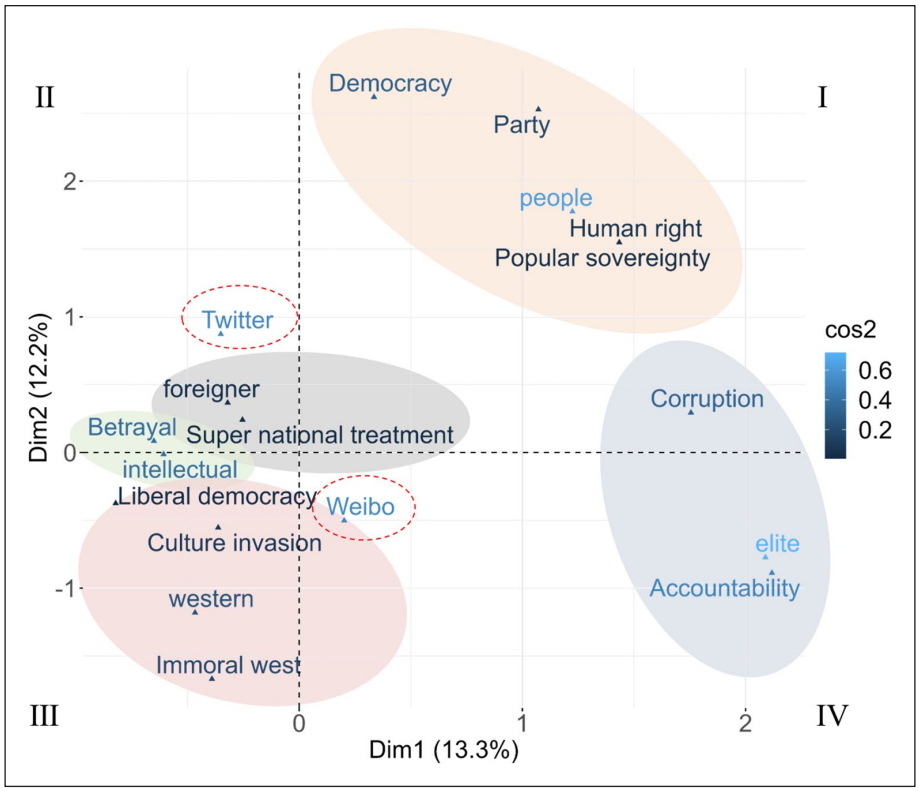

Figure 5. Semantic dimensions by checking correlations.
Note. MCA was applied to the merged data set of Weibo and Twitter. Dimension 1 reflects the destructive–constructive scale; Dimension 2 reflects the populist–ultranationalist scale.

Table 3. Coordinates, Contributions, and Cos2 of Categories of MCA.

Categories	Coordinates		Contributions		Cos2	
	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
Topics						
Corruption	1.76	.29	**14.13**	.43	.31	.01
Betrayal	−.65	.08	**9.78**	.18	.36	.01
Super-national treatment	−.25	.24	.15	.15	**.00**	**.00**
Immoral West	−.39	−1.67	.43	**8.62**	.01	.17
Popular sovereignty	1.43	1.55	.67	.85	.01	.02
Human rights	1.43	1.55	1.32	1.69	.03	.03
Accountability	2.12	−.89	**19.17**	3.69	.42	.07
Cultural invasion	−.36	−.55	1.09	2.78	.03	.06
Democracy	.34	2.62	.23	**15.39**	**.00**	.29
Liberal democracy	−.82	−.37	.45	.10	.01	**.00**
Party	1.07	2.53	1.19	**7.23**	.02	.13
Targets						
People	1.22	1.78	**8.79**	**20.23**	.20	.42
Foreigner	−.32	.37	.62	.89	.01	.02
Western	−.47	−1.18	1.37	**9.58**	.03	.20
Intellectual	−.61	−.01	**9.43**	.00	.38	**.00**
Elite	2.09	−.77	**27.63**	4.15	.63	.09
Platform						
Weibo	.20	−.50	1.30	**8.77**	.07	.44
Twitter	−.35	.87	2.25	**15.26**	.07	.44

Note. The black bold numbers represent the categories that contribute most, and the red bold numbers represent the categories that have low credibility.

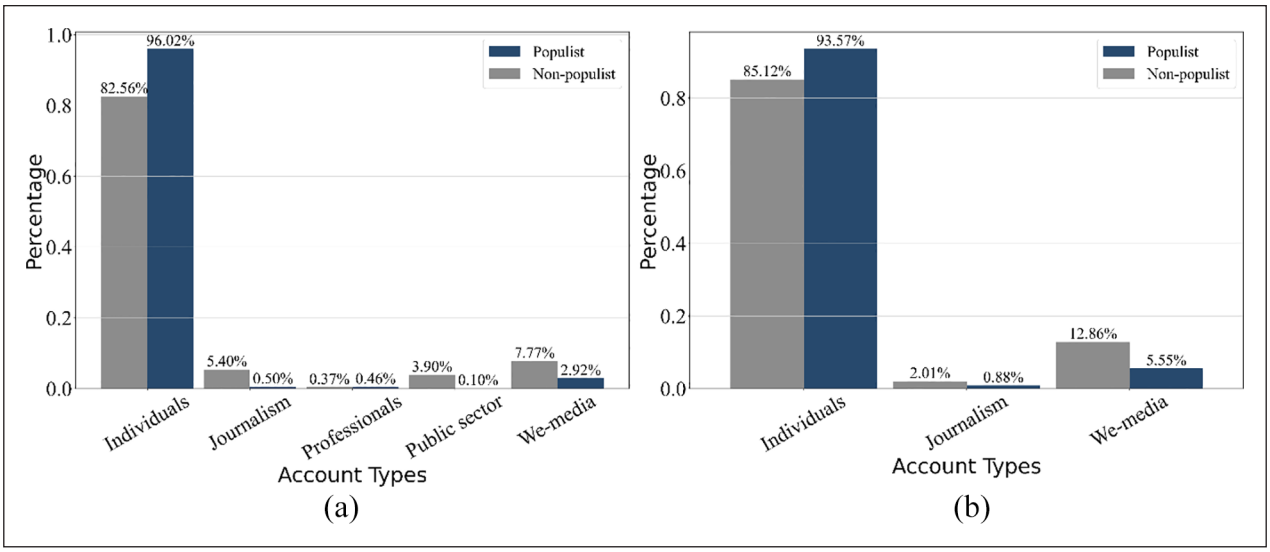

Figure 6. Distribution of account types among populist disseminators on (a) Weibo and (b) Twitter.

foreigners incorporate more populist rhetoric, in a political sense, prioritizing the interests of the people and demoting the interests of others. Topics related to public intellectuals and Westerners, in contrast, are more ultranationalist, with close links to China's historical memory of colonialization and invasion. Antagonism toward elites is posited in both the populist and ultranationalist parts of Figure 5. This is because the main theme of anti-elitism in China is to call for the removal of elites, either because they harm the interests of the people (i.e., corruption) or harm the interests of the nation (i.e., lack of accountability). This also reflects the complexity of populism in China and its close relation with ultranationalism. Overall, Twitter is dominated by populist rhetoric, and Weibo is inclined toward a more extreme, enemy-oriented and so ultranationalist rhetoric.

The four quadrants correspond to the following four semantic styles:

1. **Quadrant 1:** Constructive and populist. People protest against undemocratic institutions and seek popular sovereignty. On Twitter, this means establishing democratic institutions in China and criticizing the degradation of democracy in the West. Weibo users demand that people's voices should be heard by the authorities.
2. **Quadrant 2:** Destructive and populist. People demand rights and seek to exclude others who are conceived as not being part of the people. This resembles the widespread right-wing populism in liberal democracies.
3. **Quadrant 3:** Destructive and populist in an ultranationalist sense. Westerners and Chinese who hold pro-Western ideologies are seen as excluded by people. They are condemned as immoral because of present behaviors and because of historical hatreds.
4. **Quadrant 4:** Constructive and populist in an ultranationalist sense. Chinese ultranationalists criticize the institutions and political elites for not being responsible for the nation and the people, but they are more critical rather than antagonistic.

How "The People" and Their "Enemies" Are Constructed on Weibo and Twitter

As discussed, netizens can be classified into five account types: journalism, public sector, professionals, we-media, and individuals. Figure 6 shows that ordinary individuals on Weibo and Twitter make up the greatest user base and populist disseminators, reaching 93.57% overall on Twitter and 96.02% on Weibo, which is followed by we-media (2.92% on Weibo and 5.55% on Twitter). It makes sense that both public sector and journalism accounts (controlled by the state) are not so populist since they need to keep a public "face." Professional accounts, even though only a small proportion of the overall users, can be expected to be very populist due to the higher prevalence of populist messages compared with the non-populist proportion.

The links between agenda setters, audiences, and targets are further illustrated in Figure 7. On Weibo, the main disseminators of populist content are ordinary users, including individuals and we-media accounts. Most of them are proactive agenda setters, suggesting that the mobilizing power among populists on Weibo is presented in a flat structure. Twitter is different in that, although the protagonists

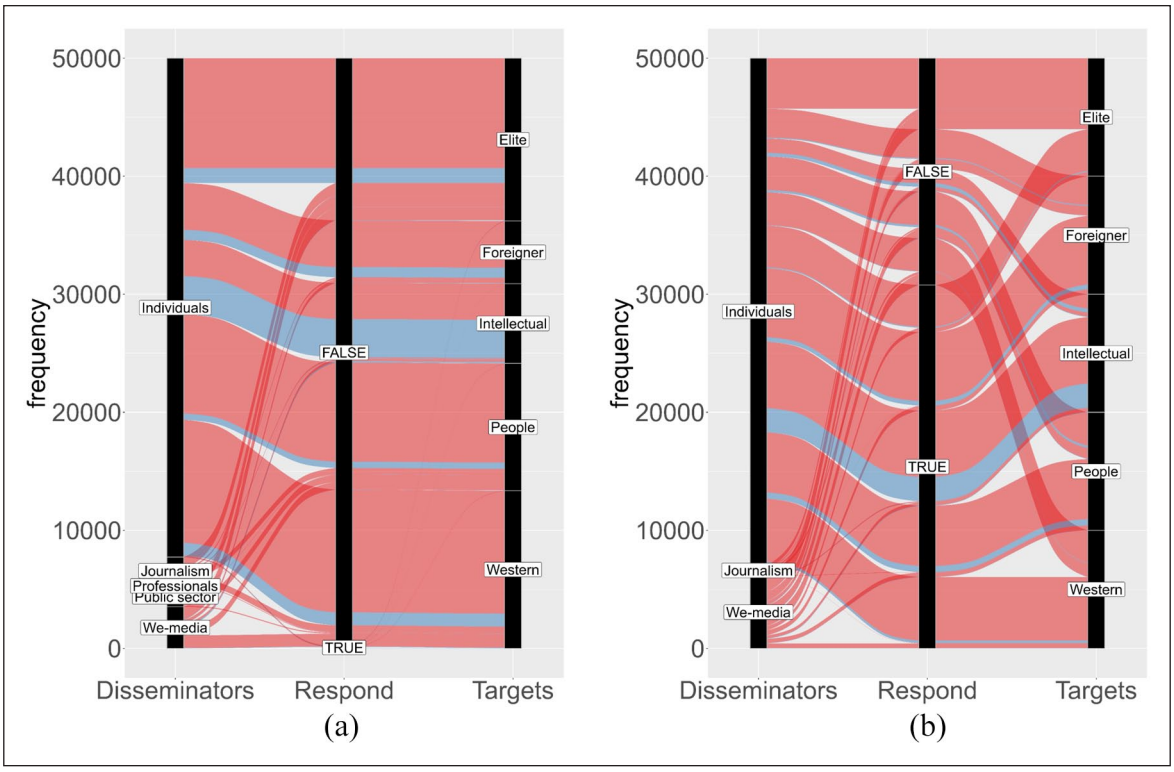

Figure 7. Parallel plots of disseminators, response behaviors, and targets of populist information on (a) Weibo and (b) Twitter.
Note. The first column lists types of disseminators who posted messages on social media (including *individuals*, *journalism*, *professionals*, *public sector*, and *we-media*); the second column categorizes agenda setters and audiences of populist information with users who respond others' posts (indicated by *repost*) are audiences and users who created the original posts are agenda setters. The third column lists the targeted groups that disseminators are attacking or representing. Blue shows the flow in the direction of populist information, and red shows the flow of non-populist information.

of populist information are also individuals (plus a small proportion of journalism and we-media), most of the populist posts are responsive rather than proactive because posts are usually forwarded from others. This indicates that certain populists on Twitter may have a greater influence than others. In terms of targets, much of the populist discourse on Weibo and Twitter targets public intellectuals. Government elites (which are different from party elites), foreigners, and Westerners are important targets on Weibo but less so on Twitter. Weibo posts and Twitter posts both demand the popular sovereignty of the people.

Varieties of Public Discourses About Populism on Weibo and Twitter

We have seen that the topics about populism on Weibo and Twitter are very different even though the same list of keywords was used in the data collection. Topics on Weibo are related to the traditional socio-political context in China: The Chinese Communist Party, according to the Constitution of the Communist Party of China, is seen as "always representing the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people." The party and people thus have common enemies, and the people assign to the party an unrestricted authority to protect them. In exchange, the people demand that the party state be subject to complete public scrutiny. This was reflected in topics such as "popular sovereignty," "accountability," "human rights," and "cultural invasion." For example:

> *"I earnestly request the party Central Committee and the relevant national leadership should punish the evil forces in accordance with the law and protect the people." (popular sovereignty)*

> *"What is the next step of the Shanghai pandemic? This is a horrible problem. Nobody in authority follows the event, is held accountable, and makes an announcement?" (accountability)*

> *"The policies make for the strict control of the people, do we have to do whatever the government tells us?" (human rights)*

> *"It is because the public sector holds an office and enjoys all the privileges but without doing their duties that the cultural traitors infiltrate our educational field." (cultural invasion)*

The idea, discussed at the outset, that there is no anti-elite populism in China because of the lack of democratic representative system, is not borne out here. Chinese people do express discontent toward immoral political elites, as the quotes above show, but they are opposed to government elites rather than party elites. Twitter is less anti-elite than Weibo, but that is understandable since Twitter is not a major channel of communication between the Chinese people and Chinese authorities. But the unique relationship between Twitter users and Chinese government due to the ban on Twitter in Mainland China has led to a different focus in populist discourses. Unlike Weibo users who mostly reside in mainland China, Twitter has few mainland users. A subset of non-mainland users has more familiarity with Western democracy and education and lifestyles, and so they criticize the party and seldom distinguish between the party and the Chinese government. Popular topics on Twitter include "democracy," "liberal democracy," and "party," with a view to representative-style democratization.

In addition, while there are lots of anti-party ideas on Twitter and Weibo, at least among opinion leaders, as Y. Zhang et al. (2018) show, many different types of nationalism are being promoted. For example, there are also supporters of the Chinese Communist Party who demand more patrimonial-style democracy (Hamilton, 1990), with the government taking more responsibility for people's well-being and asking for the removal of unaccountable government by the party.

Topics such as "corruption," "Betrayal," "super-national treatment," and "Immoral West" can be found on both platforms with similar content. "Betrayal" targets domestic enemies with a pro-Western ideology or views that depart from those of the people, like public intellectuals. In recent years, the term "super-national treatment," which mocks the idea that foreigners receive preferential treatment over Chinese citizens, has become immensely popular online. Interestingly, instead of being hostile to foreigners, this criticism has been mainly aimed at the internal enemies who are too weak-kneed to protect their co-nationals. "Immoral West" includes content whereby the West denigrates and oppresses Chinese people or poses a threat to the safety of the country and points back to the historical incursions of the West into China. Here nationalist sentiments can outweigh populist ones just as hostile sentiments also outweigh the demand for popular sovereignty.

Why do users choose a specific social platform to give voice to their views? The mechanism or design is one element, and we have seen that how an event is presented and can be shared—in addition to censorship on Weibo—are factors. Weibo is limited to a range of permitted views while Twitter, with much greater pluralism, decreases or diffuses the harm of collective voices but also permits more aggressive criticisms. The second factor is the different groupings of users, as when the criticism directed at Western countries is mocked in different tones:

"The West's cultural dwarfing of the Chinese is everywhere" (Weibo)

"The United States should implement real universal suffrage. The president should not be elected by a small political elite, but by each person" (Twitter)

Chinese populists on Weibo seek to engage with the authorities and change policies but also vent their nationalist rage, while populists on Twitter seek to introduce or restore democracy on behalf of the people, with the people including not just Chinese but those across the world.

It may also be that populists on both platforms, especially we-media accounts, are merely seeking attention for commercial purposes. Public sector accounts have to maintain social stability and a good international reputation and so use less populist rhetoric. Journalism accounts on Weibo seldom disseminate populist messages because they often stay within limits even if they also try to extend the bounds of permissible content, but on Twitter, journalism accounts perhaps use more populist rhetoric also to attract audiences. Ordinary individuals who disseminate populism are diverse; they seek to persuade others to be more ultranationalist or they may belong to a group that suffers unfair treatment from elites or enemies. In any event, on both Weibo and Twitter, ultranationalism is the main framing of populism and antagonism the main rhetorical device, though this also includes striving for rights.

Conclusion

This article has documented a unique form of populism that has emerged in Chinese cyberspace which, while falling within the concept of populism that is more widely used across the world, has a distinctive characteristic in China in the form of ultranationalism. This distinctiveness can be attributed to the unique cultural shaping of the nationalism in the Chinese context. But this populism with Chinese characteristics is also shaped by the bottom-up nature of mobilizing "the people" in its political tradition. To investigate the specific manifestations and potential consequences of this form of populism, we compare the topics, semantic content, and protagonists of populist discourses on Weibo and Twitter. Topics such as "corruption," "Betrayal," "super-national treatment," and "Immoral West" are discussed on both Weibo and Twitter, and they target political elites, public intellectuals, foreigners, and Westerners. This indicates the spread of antagonism on both platforms, with Weibo also including "popular sovereignty," "human rights," "accountability," and "cultural invasion" whereas topics such as "democracy," "liberal democracy," and "party" feature exclusively on Twitter.

The discrepancy shows how anti-elitism can have different mirrors in China. Liberalism or pluralism is not part of the vision of democracy for China on Weibo, which places

greater emphasis on the establishment's responsibilities. If the government can "take good care" of the majority, people may be willing to compromise on liberty. If the public sees the government's accountability as failing, however, then the people must be in charge of choosing and removing their representatives. Users on the two platforms represent various political alternative views based on their experiences: Weibo users mainly want the party to be accountable for getting rid of the immoral political elites in the government in actions like anti-corruption campaigns, while Twitter users criticize the representativeness of the party or condemn party elites for acting like Westerners more directly. We can surmise that this difference can be attributed to the respective user base of the two sites; one almost entirely mainland based, and the other mostly based outside the mainland (but since definitive statistics about our two sets of users cannot be obtained, this guess and those below, though plausible, would need more data).

The populist posts on the two platforms differ in their semantic content as well. The destructive–constructive and populist–ultranationalist dimensions have Weibo engaging in constructive topics such as "accountability" and "corruption" of government elites, while Twitter involves constructive topics around "democracy", "liberal democracy", and "human rights". On the second dimension, Weibo is more ultranationalist with Westerners and pro-Western elites the major targets. Twitter, in contrast, includes democracy and popular sovereignty and the conflicts between the people and foreigners and corrupt elites; thus, populism has a more "Western" tinge here. The former difference relates to the public sector accounts registered on Weibo that establish a closer connection between the people and the authorities and where liberal or democratic expression is stifled. The latter is because easier access to collective discussions about specific trending events on Weibo can foster a stronger sense of national identification among users. However, the difference in semantics described above is not intended to draw a clear boundary between Weibo and Twitter. Some political expressions on Weibo can be very liberal and populist, akin to the Western style, while Chinese messages on Twitter can also be supervisory towards elites and display ultranationalism. Moreover, it is worth noting that expressions on both platforms may change over time and are susceptible to external events like US–China trade talks. With the liberalization of the Internet in China, more diverse groups can be found in Chinese cyberspace who use sophisticated ways to express political opinions (Han, 2018).

Finally, the characteristics of protagonists in the populist discussion play a role: Ordinary individuals, we-media, and professionals are the main disseminators of populist messages on Weibo, while government accounts and journalism accounts are not as populist as might be expected. On Twitter, without a large number of government and professional accounts, the main disseminators are ordinary individuals, we-media, and journalism. Still, both platforms are dominated by bottom-up forces rather than populist political leaders and parties as in the Western context. But caution is needed when interpreting this result: we have taken the labels and follower numbers as indicating different protagonists. As in many studies of social media, it is not possible for us to match platform users with the real demographics of users, nor evaluate how representative they are of the population at large (Lazer et al., 2020).

Still, the findings allow for an overall understanding of Chinese populism and its ultranationalist targeting of enemies. First, like populism in Western countries, Chinese netizens also appeal to popular sovereignty, but this pursuit has multiple forms: those who adhere to traditional Chinese beliefs want the party to be held more accountable by punishing corrupt government elites while they never doubt the party's legitimacy. Groups that are liberal, in contrast, criticize the party for being unable to represent the people but they also criticize Western elites that are undemocratic vis-a-vis their people. Second, Chinese netizens show hostility to both internal and external enemies, but compared with foreign foes, their populist rhetoric is more strongly aimed at internal enemies—public intellectuals and political elites. Internal traitors, who denigrate and harm their fellows, are worse than the external invaders.

The spread of Chinese populism in its distinctive ultranationalist version can thus be a double-edged sword for domestic politics and for certain groups: on the positive side, populist online expression provides a flexible space for people to supervise the government and strengthens their sovereignty. It also weakens more radical anti-foreigner and exclusionary sentiment in China by transferring historical hatreds to a focus on contemporary cultural conflicts and ideological differences. However, the downside is that collective voices online decrease the legitimacy of the establishment by means of suppressing minority voices (populist exclusionism). The ever-increasing anti-regime rhetoric may thus, if it becomes more severe, threaten the stability of Chinese politics by forcing the government into extremes. Antagonisms based on cultural conflicts and ideological differences could lead to xenophobia, anti-immigration, and anti-globalization sentiments. Furthermore, as mentioned at the outset, populism in its ultranationalist form can be conceptualized in different ways, as with the analysis of China's "rise" in a hostile international order (C. Zhang, 2020) or instead as part of a transnational "alt-right" with distinctive Chinese characteristics (T. Yang & Fang, 2023). We have instead focused on the intersection between populism and exclusionary ultranationalist content, yielding a set of topics which overlap with these studies but also depart from them, depending on the two platforms, in significant ways.

Populism with its Chinese ultranationalist characteristics can contribute to understanding populism more widely: if populism can be found in an alternative context with media

that are only partially autonomous, its expression can be limited. The question thus arises: What positive influence does populism have in this context (strengthening popular sovereignty within a safe and legitimized frame), and what are the dangers (pushing the party state toward aggressive foreign policies and anti-minority domestic politics)? Put differently, how does populism with its distinctive characteristics on the two platforms, including its ultranationalist manifestations in the context of China's different media system, nevertheless evince comparable themes and topics to populisms online elsewhere? These are questions that our findings raise for future research.

This research has a number of limitations, including a 1-month data collection and online discourses being influenced by offline events that occurred during the data collection time; as well as manual data coding which, even if validated by additional coders, is bound to have measurement errors. Furthermore, Weibo is only one mainland platform; others, such as Zhihu and BiliBili, could be more indicative of other user groups. However, future work can build on this study by covering longer data collection periods or comparing multiple Chinese social media platforms. Furthermore, it is possible that there might be bots among our sample, a problem that is common in social media analyses. Finally, as mentioned, we are unable to know how much content has been censored. That is likely more of a problem for Weibo than for Twitter, but for our topics, this is an important limitation (though common to scholarship about Chinese social media).

This article has also shown that the different mechanisms or designs of media platforms and the distribution of user groups can have different implications for populist rhetoric. Earlier we noted that some regard an agonistic populism as vital for democracy, and in the Chinese context, it is also a tool for the party to become responsive to the public. Can online populism be shaped in a productive or constructive direction? Weibo can be seen as a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, creating a public sphere, but this can also lead users to retreat into in-group niches. In either case, both platforms can enhance pluralism and public opinion formation in China. Finally, we have seen the bottom-up nature of populism in the sense that elites are targeted.

Populism is, therefore, not only a strategy or ideology produced by political leaders or parties. Scholars have documented how populism has spread elsewhere in Asia, such as India, Turkey, and the Philippines, and beyond (Moffitt, 2016). Will populism completely disappear if leaders such as Modi or Erdogan leave office? The likely answer based on a case where bottom forces dominate, including in our study, is no. We have uncovered different topics even on two social media platforms, thus confirming that populism, and its ultranationalist framing, takes various forms even with its Chinese characteristics. This answer also applies to Western democracies. Donald Trump ended his term but still enjoys widespread support by endorsing candidates. What is needed is not necessarily to stop such voices, but rather to prevent them from being aggressive or coming under the sway of the manipulation of political elites. This requires an understanding of both top-down and bottom-up forces.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Yuan Zhang https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6961-7901
Ralph Schroeder https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4229-1585

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. GitHub Source: https://github.com/brightmart/roberta_zh.

References

Allcock, J. B. (1971). Populism: A brief biography. *Sociology*, *5*(3), 371–387.

Aslanidis, P. (2017). Populism and social movements. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. O. Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 305–325). Oxford University Press.

Bell, D. A. (2010). *China's new confucianism*. Princeton University Press.

Blei, D., & Lafferty, J. (2006). Correlated topic models. *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems*, *18*, 147.

Canovan, M. (1982). Two strategies for the study of populism. *Political Studies*, *30*(4), 544–552.

Carrico, K. (2017). *The great Han: Race, nationalism, and tradition in China today*. University of California Press.

Di Cocco, J., & Monechi, B. (2022). How populist are parties? Measuring degrees of populism in party manifestos using supervised machine learning. *Political Analysis*, *30*(3), 311–327.

Fang, K., & Repnikova, M. (2018). Demystifying "Little Pink": The creation and evolution of a gendered label for nationalistic activists in China. *New Media & Society*, *20*(6), 2162–2185.

Fang, K., & Repnikova, M. (2022). The state-preneurship model of digital journalism innovation: Cases from China. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *27*(2), 497–517.

Gao, Q., Abel, F., Houben, G. J., & Yu, Y. (2012, July 16–20). A comparative study of users' microblogging behavior on Sina Weibo and Twitter. In *Proceedings 20 of the International Conference on User Modeling, Adaptation, and Personalization* (pp. 88–101). Springer.

Gerbaudo, P. (2017). From cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism: An ideological history of digital activism. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, *15*(2), 477–489.

Hamilton, G. G. (1990). Patriarchy, patrimonialism, and filial piety: A comparison of China and Western Europe. *British Journal of Sociology*, *41*, 77–104.

Han, R. (2018). *Contesting cyberspace in China*. Columbia University Press.

He, K. (2023). *Bottom-up and Online Populism in Contemporary China: An understanding beyond the West* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Groningen]. https://research.rug.nl/en/publications/bottom-up-and-online-populism-in-contemporary-china-an-understand

Huang, Q. (2023). The discursive construction of populist and misogynist nationalism: Digital vigilantism against unpatriotic intellectual women in China. *Social Media+ Society*, *9*(2), 20563051231170816.

Huguet-Cabot, P. L., Abadi, D., Fischer, A., & Shutova, E. (2021). Us vs. them: A dataset of populist attitudes, news bias and emotions. *arXiv preprint* arXiv:*2101*.11956

Hutchby, I. (2000). *Conversation and technology: The telephone, the computer, and the nature of human communication: From the telephone to the internet*. Polity Press.

Jiang, M., & Esarey, A. (2018). Uncivil society in digital China: Incivility, fragmentation, and political stability. *International Journal of Communication*, *12*, 1928–1944.

Jungherr, A., & Schroeder, R. (2021). *Digital transformations of the public arena*. Cambridge University Press.

Jungherr, A., Schroeder, R., & Stier, S. (2019). Digital media and the surge of political outsiders: Explaining the success of political challengers in the United States, Germany, and China. *Social Media+ Society*, *5*(3), 2056305119875439.

Kwak, H., Lee, C., Park, H., & Moon, S. (2010, April). What is Twitter, a social network or a news media? In *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web* (pp. 591–600). Association for Computing Machinery.

Laclau, E. (2012). *Politics and ideology in Marxist theory: Capitalism, fascism, populism*. Verso Books. (Original work published 1977)

Lazer, D. M., Pentland, A., Watts, D. J., Aral, S., Athey, S., Contractor, N., & . . .Nelson, A. (2020). Computational social science: Obstacles and opportunities. *Science*, *369*(6507), 1060–1062.

Lehman-Ludwig, A., Burke, A., Ambler, D., & Schroeder, R. (2023). Chinese anti-Westernism on social media. *Global Media and China*, *8*, 119–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364231166541

Maier, D., Waldherr, A., Miltner, P., Wiedemann, G., Niekler, A., Keinert, A., . . .Adam, S. (2018). Applying LDA topic modeling in communication research: Toward a valid and reliable methodology. *Communication Methods and Measures*, *12*(2–3), 93–118.

Matassi, M., & Boczkowski, P. (2023). *To know is to compare: Studying social media across nations, media, and Platforms*. MIT Press.

Mattingly, D., & Yao, E. (2020). *How propaganda manipulates emotion to fuel nationalism: Experimental evidence from China*. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3514716.

Miao, Y. (2020). Can China be populist? Grassroot populist narratives in the Chinese cyberspace. *Contemporary Politics*, *26*(3), 268–287.

Miller, M. C. (2021). *Why nations rise: Narratives and the path to great power*. Oxford University Press.

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press.

Morisi, D., & Wagner, M. (2021). Bringing people closer to the elites: The effect of information on populist attitudes. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *33*(3), 664–677.

Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563.

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Roberts, M. (2018). *Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton University Press.

Röder, M., Both, A., & Hinneburg, A. (2015, February). Exploring the space of topic coherence measures. In *Proceedings of the Eighth ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining* (pp. 399–408). Association for Computing Machinery.

Rooduijn, M., & Pauwels, T. (2011). Measuring populism: Comparing two methods of content analysis. *West European Politics*, *34*(6), 1272–1283.

Schroeder, R. (2020). Political power and the globalizing spread of populist politics. *Journal of Political Power*, *13*(1), 22–40.

Schroeder, R. (2021). The populist revolt against the West: Alternative paths within a globalizing modernity? *Comparative Sociology*, *20*, 419–440.

Tai, Z. (2015). Networked resistance: Digital populism, online activism, and mass dissent in China. *Popular Communication*, *13*(2), 120–131.

Tang, W. (2016). *Populist authoritarianism: Chinese political culture and regime stability*. Oxford University Press.

Wei, W. (2010). Super-national treatment: A misconception or a creation with Chinese characteristics? *Frontiers of Law in China*, *5*(3), 376–396.

Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics. *Comparative Politics*, *34*, 1–22.

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.

Yang, T., & Fang, K. (2023). How dark corners collude: A study on an online Chinese alt-right community. *Information, Communication & Society*, *26*(2), 441–458.

Zhang, C. (2020). Right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics? Identity, otherness and global imaginaries in debating world politics online. *European Journal of International Relations*, *26*(1), 88–115.

Zhang, C. (2022). Contested disaster nationalism in the digital age: Emotional registers and geopolitical imaginaries in COVID-19 narratives on Chinese social media. *Review of International Studies*, *48*(2), 219–242.

Zhang, Y., Liu, J., & Wen, J. R. (2018). Nationalism on Weibo: Towards a multifaceted understanding of Chinese nationalism. *The China Quarterly*, *235*, 758–783.

Zhao, S. (2004). *A nation-state by construction: Dynamics of modern Chinese nationalism*. Stanford University Press.

Zhao, T. (2008). The self and the other: An unanswered question in Confucian theory. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, *3*(2), 163–176.

Zhu, Y. (2012). *Two billion eyes: The story of China central television*. The New Press.

Ziolkowski, C. (2021). *Vox populism: Analysis of the anti-elite content of presidential candidates' speeches*. University of California, Los Angeles.

Author biographies

Yuan Zhang is a PhD student at the University of Zurich, Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ). She received her Masters' degree in Social Data Science from the University of Oxford in 2022 and Political Science & Political Economy from LSE in 2019. She is interested in measuring political activities using social media data and computational methods, as well as establishing connections between the online and offline worlds.

Ralph Schroeder is a professor in Social Science of the Internet at the Oxford Internet Institute. He has authored or co-authored more than 150 articles, and his recent books include "Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology and Globalization" (UCL Press, 2018) and "Digital Transformations of the Public Arena" (with Andreas Jungherr, 2022, Cambridge University Press). His current research interests include digital media and right-wing populism, and the social implications of artificial intelligence.