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Populism, Political Participation and Public Sphere on Chinese Internet: /AC as an Example

By

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Abstract

This paper provides a close look at the formation of the public sphere on the Chinese Internet by investigating the history of /AC, a sub-forum in Tieba, a Chinese social media. By going over the transformation process of /AC and analyzing the concepts of populism that emerged in /AC, the paper tries to provide some ideas of how the public sphere grow in the Chinese Internet under the influence of the government. Users of Chinese Internet forums may unconsciously transform their discussion groups into a public sphere when they argue about topics related to politics. This paper also gives a simple picture of Chinese netizens' version of populism built by their unconscious political participation and their motivations for it.

Key Words: Public sphere, Chinese Internet, Populism

I. Introduction

Populism as a political concept is not strange to the world nowadays. Throughout the world, the populist movement and leaders are strengthening their force and voice in public political participation. In Argentina, Milei won his presidency with his radical thoughts of right-wing populism. In Hungary, Orban secured the position of prime minister for over a decade with the fame of right-wing populists and his authoritarian policies. In the U.S., Donald Trump and his supporters MAGA are also taking the wheels of the White House. Some scholars saw his victory in 2016 as the marking point of the rise of populism in the U.S. However, populism is not a concept adopted only by the right wing. The concepts of populism have also developed to the other extreme. For example, Sanders provides the leftists in the U.S. with another choice of populism, and he is winning his own popularity in American society. In a word, although populism is receiving popularity in all fields, the public, politicians, and scholars are still arguing about the concepts of populism.

Besides the rise and split inside the populism movement, another notable change is the use of the Internet in public political participation. Since 2008, when Obama and his team first used the Internet as the primary measure to advertise for the election, the Internet has secured its position and proved its value in the political movement. In the 2020s, the Internet has become a part of people's daily lives. The percentage of people who have access to the Internet rises from 16.8% to 67% from 2005 to 2023.¹ The widespread use of the Internet causes a great change in the public sphere. For the first time, the public is allowed to take part in political discussions massively. Different from the classical public sphere, where the

¹ ITU. 'Percentage of global population accessing the internet from 2005 to 2023, by market maturity.' Chart. November 27, 2023.

people from the root level are usually limited to receiving information only, like TV programs and newspapers, the Internet cuts the cost of political participation for the common people and allows them to post their own understanding of political topics and debate with other people directly. In this case, the rules of politics have changed greatly, and the public spheres are seeing many more new participants than ever before. To some extent, public politics opens the door for populism to rise in the Western political field.

But up to now, we are talking about countries with a representative democratic system, where votes and elections are the main dishes in politics. On the other side of the Earth, China may have a different story about populism and the public sphere. Different from Western society, the public sphere has been a strange phrase for China throughout history. In modern times, the rule of the CPC also monopolizes political participation in China. Traditional media, like TV channels, newspapers, magazines, etc., are mostly controlled and censored by the government. However, the Internet and Internet forums are also growing rapidly in China. The rapid progress is far beyond the government's control, and the Internet is becoming a new space for enthusiastic Chinese netizens to discuss political affairs. The great firewall blocks Chinese netizens from getting access to the global Internet, but they are showing great enthusiasm in discussing politics under the censorship of government. Although the government is trying to stretch its hand into cyberspace, it seems that it's hard for the government to monopolize the voice on the Internet like what it has done in the traditional media.² In this case, Chinese netizens now are enjoying their freedom to build up their own public sphere on the Internet.

² Su, Wendy. 2015. "A Virtual Public Sphere and Its Limitations – Microblog, Online Civic Engagement in China and Its Interplay with the State." *The Journal of International Communication* 22 (1): 1–21. doi:10.1080/13216597.2015.1076734.

However, misunderstandings of political ideologies happen in those discussions and often lead to social events. Among them, populism is perhaps one of the most important issues identified by the Chinese government. The word “populism” is used by the media and scholars from the government many times to describe a “problematic trend” in the Chinese public opinion field. For example, in 2012, an article published in “China Youth Daily,” a newspaper operated by the Communist Youth League of China, criticized the trend of populism with strong accusations:

Populism has become a significant harm in today's China, and its influence is growing so fast that it necessitates governance. The ideological and theoretical community should consciously intensify the criticism of populism, much like Lenin's critique of the Russian populists, exposing its ugly nature on Chinese soil. The government should strictly punish the irrational behaviors of populism according to national laws and regulations. At the same time, vigilance must be maintained to avoid being swayed by populist rhetoric and actions.³

We can see from the last paragraph that in this article, the Chinese official media is using extremely strong words that even call for an ideological war against populism. But does Chinese populism share the same concept as that in global society? What is the Chinese government criticizing when it refers to populism? This is a very critical question since the Chinese government, led by the Communist Party of China (To make it short, I will use CPC in the rest of the paper), is remaking itself as the only leader of Chinese society. In a state whose ruling party has already claimed that it is the best representative of the people, which is much like the populists whose main claim is they are the real people's representative, why

³ Liu, Jianfei, Populism, “An Undeniable Challenge”, *China Youth Daily*, 12/05/2012

is populism still a problem for it? What do the Chinese people think of populism in their new-owned public sphere? Do they have some ideas of populism different from those of the Chinese government?

In this paper, I examine a subforum, /Aircraft-Carrier (to make it easy to read, I will call it /AC in the following words), on the popular social media site called Tieba. I will use /AC's history to tell the story of how Chinese netizens built up their own public sphere and the way they learned political participation. Then, I will use the discussions that referred to populism collected from /AC users to see how the Chinese netizens develop populism with their own definitions. Then, I will give some ideas on how the Chinese public sphere rose on the Chinese Internet and how populism was defined among the Chinese public.

II. Literature Reviews

To begin with the reviews, I would like to start with the definition of the public sphere to help us draw a clearer picture of this important concept in this essay. The original concept of the public sphere raised by Habermas is "A domain of our social life where public opinions could be formed, and citizens could express and publicize their views of their own interest without being subjective to coercion."⁴ This is such a classical definition that the public sphere is still functioning as the way Habermas indicates. Of course, as time changes, the form of the public sphere changes, too. As a metaphor, the public sphere is no more than a concept rather than an entity. However, it does have some real places and institutions to show itself in the real world. The classical practical spaces for the bourgeoisie public sphere may be the coffee house,

⁴ Habermas, J.(1991): "The public sphere" In Mukerji, C.; Schudson, M.(Ed.): Rethinking popular culture. Contemporary perspectives in cultural studies. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press. pp.398-404.

newspapers and magazines, and the Congress. But as Habermas says:

The public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access. A public sphere from which specific groups would be *eo ipso* excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all.⁵

The public sphere was not perfect from the very beginning as it was trying to expand its access to the whole population. Media in the digital age has joined the line and plays a more and more important role in the story of the public sphere. Although some scholars express their worry about whether the public and even the academia are mixing up the terms “media” and “public sphere” in the same concept, they all agree that media is a key component of the system of the public sphere as the information sources and platforms to exchange opinions with others.

The public sphere and populism in China are not obscure topics. As many scholars have acknowledged, China has a very different history from Western society, which is the birthplace of the concept of the “public sphere.” This makes the history of the public sphere in China an interesting topic to investigate. The majority of the scholars chose to start from the Republic Era of China and focus on the period near the end of the 20th century when citizenship building was very active in Chinese society.

For example, Zhang Yanshuang goes over the history of the public sphere in China in his literature review and stresses the period after 1989. In his reviews, he points out that the Chinese public sphere may have a long history, but before 1989, the strong state interference and strict social culture made it hard for the real public sphere to thrive. The public sphere in China really started when Jiang Zeming, the successor of Deng and his reforming policies,

⁵ Habermas, J. (1991) “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society”, MIT Press, 1991. p.85.

decided to be tolerant towards some mild political events after the Tiananmen Event to avoid similar riots, which may have shaken the stability of the society.⁶

Others also focus on the reaction and growth of the newborn public sphere when it faces an authoritarian government. Liu and McCormick chose to examine how private media and market reform bring the Chinese public sphere space and interact with the existing social institutions. In their research, they choose to focus on privately owned media. Liu points out that after 1989, the emergence of commercial media opened a hole in government-dominated propaganda, which made it possible for the public sphere to emerge and distribute different political discourses. However, they also show concerns about how the commercial media deal with the censorship from the government and their effort to democratization in China.⁷

Tong Jingrong also checks how the Chinese public sphere becomes agonistic and shows its attitudes towards the government. In his paper, he makes strong comments on radical emotions. From his perspective, the hatred, anger, compassion, etc., speed up the exposure of social conflicts, evoking reflections and further discussion of politics among the Chinese citizens, especially on the new media like the Internet, and eventually lead to the formation of an agonistic public sphere in Chinese society.⁸

Tong was not the only one who noticed the important role played by the Internet. Shao and his colleagues also hold the point that the Chinese Internet, especially Internet social media, contributed a lot to the formation of the public sphere. Their paper analyzes the impact on Chinese public sphere formation produced by the internet social media. They also produced

⁶ Zhang, Yanshuang. "Public Sphere in China: A Literature Review." Available at SSRN 2836020 (2014).

⁷ Liu, Qing, and Barrett McCormick. "The media and the public sphere in contemporary China." *boundary 2* 38, no. 1 (2011): 101-134.

⁸ Tong, Jingrong. "The formation of an agonistic public sphere: Emotions, the Internet and news media in China." *China Information* 29, no. 3 (2015): 333-351.

additional thoughts for the public sphere theory in Chinese discourse. They point out that Internet social media helps Chinese society to build up a different style of public sphere from the traditional single civil society. Considering China's special policies and Internet environment, the public sphere in China is more fragmented and integrated into the power process to achieve consensus under the governmental authority.⁹

All those papers have done great work tracing the history of the public sphere in China. They look back at its historical possibility and discuss its potential origins and features on the Chinese Internet. Also, many of them mention emotions that play important roles in discussions in the public sphere. These have led to the Chinese public sphere becoming more radical and agonistic.

So, when it comes to the modern age, it's not surprising that many scholars are paying attention to the rising populism in the Chinese public sphere. Zhang raises the research by comparing the populist posts on Twitter and Weibo, showing the difference in populism between China and U.S. society. Analyzed from a database of over 100,000 posts from Twitter and Weibo, their conclusion shows that Chinese netizens are building populism on the Chinese Internet by competing and defining the rise of China. The Chinese netizens use this way to rally the "people of the nation."¹⁰

In this way, Chinese populism may have something to do with nationalism. Other scholars also have made some efforts to deal with these concerns. For example, Hanson and his colleagues examined how populism in the Chinese public sphere combined populism and

⁹ Shao, Peiren, and Yun Wang. "How does social media change Chinese political culture? The formation of fragmented public sphere." *Telematics and Informatics* 34.3 (2017): 694-704.

¹⁰ Zhang, Yuan, and Ralph Schroeder. "'It's All About US vs THEM!': Comparing Chinese Populist Discourses on Weibo and Twitter." *Social Media+ Society* 10.1 (2024).

patriotism, like what happened in Russia, in part of the thesis. They explained that both Russia and China share similar authoritarian political atmosphere, and their public are promoting their own populism with their own understanding with the reason of nationalism.¹¹

In a word, these up-to-date papers all indicate the same conclusion: there is an active Chinese public sphere, and the phenomenon of rising populism is happening in it. The discussions of populism in Chinese society count and are influencing this country's politics.

Although these papers have done great work in examining the concepts of populism in China, the public sphere as an environment for Chinese populism to grow, and the Chinese public sphere itself, I dare to argue that the research from the perspective of the split of political understanding is still a story that worth of telling. As we know, we cannot ignore the characters played by the Chinese government and CPC in the Chinese public sphere. In this case, any discussions happening in the Chinese public sphere should all be seen as interaction with the Chinese authority. The political trends and ideologies, such as populism, that have been raised in the Chinese public sphere are far beyond a political movement. It touches on the core ability of the Chinese government to maintain its governance by testing if the Chinese government could convey its ideology and political opinions to the Chinese public.

For these reasons, I would like to step further from the previous research. I would like to see how the Chinese public sphere emerges among the public, where netizens have turned a place into a public sphere and developing populism without guidance on the Chinese Internet. Then, based on the literature, I decided to research the Chinese Internet, too. The target research objection is a Chinese Internet forum called Tieba. In the following parts of the paper, I will

¹¹ McKee, Alan. *The public sphere: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. p.5.

first introduce the social background of the Chinese Internet and how Tieba works as a social media. Then, I will use /AC, a sub-forum in Tieba, as an example to explain how a public sphere emerges on Chinese social media. Then, I will look into the concepts of populism /AC users built with the data I collected from their posts to see what Chinese netizens think of populism and how the Chinese public sphere interacts with the Chinese authority and builds their own political culture.

III. Introduction of Tieba and Reasons for Choosing it

A. Introduction to the background of the research

At the beginning of the research, I will make some background introductions since the Chinese public opinion environment is very different from that of the Western world. Considering the monopolization of traditional media by the government, discussions of politics are usually very limited under censorship in the media, such as TV channels, newspapers, etc. That is to say, Chinese society doesn't have a classical public sphere where the public can express their own political opinions and influence politics by publishing articles, delivering speeches, debating on TV, and so on for a very long time. The situation is different after the Opening and Reforming policies, which opened the gate for private capital to enter the media industry, but the decisive change comes from the Internet. Although the Chinese government is still adopting censorship and trying to direct public opinion, we can see that more and more people are voicing themselves and trying to take advantage of Internet platforms to expand their influence on certain topics or events. The gray area for VPNs may prove that the government is compromising because of its inability to control the Chinese Internet. There is

an opinion that the VPN is the backdoor deliberately left for the public by the government to maintain the government's policy of the Internet as "a door closed but not locked"¹². Also, many times, public events force the government to make answers or state its position. For example, in 2023, some insulting and showing-off posts made by a granddaughter (called "北极鲶鱼" on the Internet) of a high-rank officer in Shenzhen evoked a great impact on the Chinese Internet. Angry netizens rallied on different social platforms and media to ask the government to launch a formal investigation of the corrupt officer. In a few months, the government tried to control the situation, but the netizens kept questioning the position of the government. Eventually, the government declared that the suspected officer was guilty and adjudicated serious punishment for the officer.¹³ This proves that now, on the Internet, the public is asking the government to sit at the negotiation table instead of only receiving the administration from the government like before.¹⁴ This allows the public sphere to grow on the Chinese Internet.

Another important background is the existence of a national-scale firewall that separates the Chinese Internet from the global Internet. Since the Internet Great Wall exists, most Chinese people usually surf and make posts on their own Internet platform. This fact creates an isolated but special environment on the Chinese Internet. For most countries in the world, the Internet is a global concept that allows anyone who has access to the Internet to be connected to a virtual global society. However, this also means that these netizens are receiving much influence from the cultures, political events, and other factors that affect their public opinions when they are

¹² Yang, K. 2017. *The Door Is Closed, but Not Locked: China's VPN Policy* (Doctoral dissertation, Georgetown University).

¹³ Zhen, Xiaoyu. 2023. "北极鲶鱼"事件, 官方通报处理结果!" *Remin Daily*.

<https://www.peopleapp.com/column/30035408120-500000460341>

¹⁴ Han, Rongbin. "From empowering Internet to digital dominance: The past, present, and future of cyber politics in China." *Communication and the Public* (2024): 20570473241264904.

faced with local problems. In China, the cyber Great Wall denies this influence from its roots. Although VPNs are circulated universally among Chinese netizens and Chinese people, they could receive global popularity in many ways. The Great Wall cut the public from the interaction between the Chinese public and global society. On the other hand, China holds one of the largest groups of netizens, over 1 billion. This allows the Chinese Internet to produce abundant content and make the local community the absolute majority of the Chinese Internet. In other words, the global culture has little influence on the Chinese Internet. It is possible for the Chinese Internet to become a replica of Chinese society since the Chinese public is mostly reacting to the events in China and Chinese people on the Chinese Internet. In this case, it is possible for us to analyze the Chinese public opinion and the political attitudes completely from the Chinese Internet forums.

B. Reasons to choose Tieba and Introduction of Tieba

There are many Internet forums on the Chinese Internet. Like the global market, Chinese Internet companies also produce different social platforms for different users. Among them, there are many potential forums that could be used as a target research site. The potential target forums would be Weibo (the microblog in China), Tieba (a forum whose function and audience is like Reddit), and Bilibili (a video platform like YouTube). There are some obvious reasons for choosing these Internet platforms over others. First, these three forums are enjoying popularity, which could support the trustworthiness of my research. Second, these platforms are more comprehensive. There are other apps like Red Book that enjoy the same popularity as I chose. But these apps are more focused on some specific areas that are far away from serious

topics like politics. Third, these forums allow people to express their opinions and views in a more systematic way, or users can consciously express their opinions through words and videos. TikTok is another mammoth on the Chinese Internet, but short videos are good tools for sharing events and moods rather than thoughts about political topics.

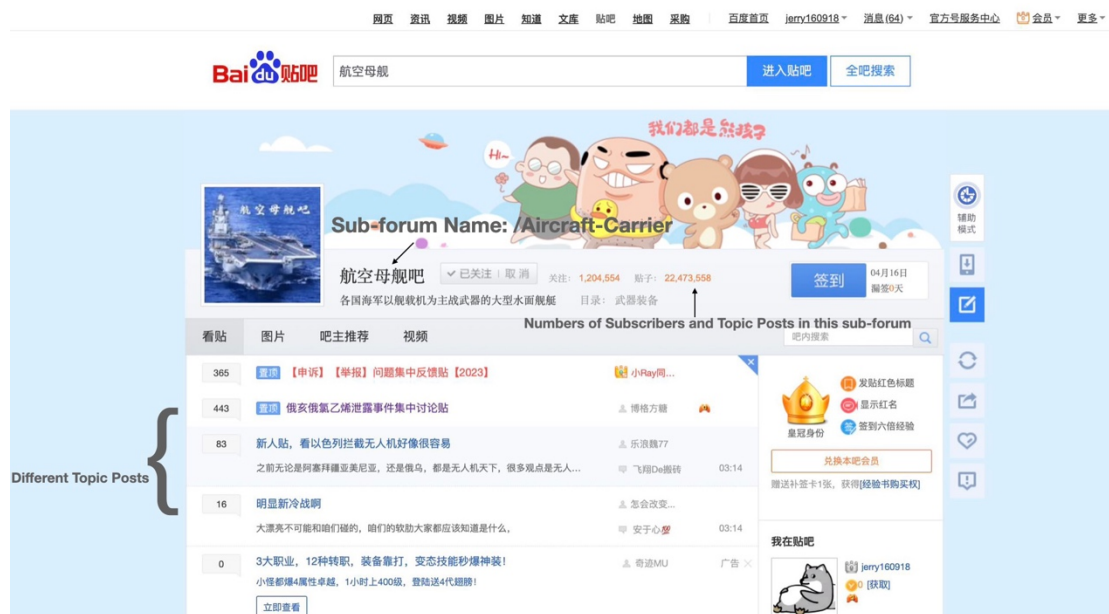
However, it's wise to narrow down the research scale to one single forum, considering the limitation of a single research. For this project, I choose Tieba, the Chinese version of Reddit. There are several reasons. First, comparing Tieba to other forums, as I mentioned above, Tieba has the longest history since 2003 as a Chinese native Internet forum. This fact helps Tieba to secure a solid foundation with abundant users, discussion materials, and a stable forum culture. The posts in recent years are abundant and available for a contemporary research topic. Second, Tieba has a more stable section system. Every "Ba" (section) has its own rank system, organizer, and administrator. This divides the users into clearly different interesting groups and allows me to find those sections that are more interested in discussing politics more easily. The clear boundary of sections creates a sense of belonging for section users, and I could trace some certain popular users and their posts to do my research.

Tieba is a text-based forum that has a long history and enjoys lasting fame on the Chinese Internet. Although the posts before 2017 were hidden after 2019 (they can still be read by manual search but won't be displayed automatically; this event was called "Burnt Down of Cyber Library of Alexandria" by Chinese netizens), the posts in recent years are still abundant and available for a contemporary research topic. What's more, Tieba is also famous for political participation. In 2016, the users of Tieba launched a "conquest movement" that called for their members to flood some accounts that are in favor of Taiwan's independence on Facebook with

memes. This protest movement had a great influence on both the Chinese Internet and the global Internet and even raised the attention of official media. With this background, Tieba has gradually attracted more and more people to discuss political topics.

In Tieba, discussions are launched by one user who wants something to be discussed to raise a topic, and other users are allowed to post replies and comment on them. There are also threads and topics to allow users to find their own communities. The situation gets more complicated when dealing with differences between mobile and PC platforms. So, in this session, I will use pictures from Tieba in PC to introduce the concepts of Tieba, which will be mentioned in the following analysis.

Regarding the operational details of Tieba, minor communities are divided to allow users who share similar interests to build their own discussion space. These units are called “Ba” (吧). To make it easier to understand, I will call them “sub-forums.” There are millions of sub-forums on Tieba as a whole, and users are allowed to join whatever sub-forums they are interested in and quit whenever they want. Generally speaking, becoming a member of a certain sub-forum doesn’t give any practical benefit to the users. The posts they make are public to all the users in Tieba. In this case, it’s totally free for users to read all the posts from all sub-forums and take part in the discussion even if they are not a member of the sub-forum. Here is a screen of a sub-forum called “航空母舰吧” (/Aircraft-Carrier):



P1: A screenshot of Tieba and /Aircraft-Carrier sub-forum on PC

In this picture, I have labeled the key elements in a sub-forum in Tieba. Besides the name of a sub-forum, there's a number counting how many users have joined this sub-forum and how many topic posts they have made. Here, it leads to the definition of posts. Different from Reddit's "Topic-Thread-Comment-Reply," in Tieba, all the discussions are called "贴" (Post). To make a difference, I will call the questions raised by the first user, which is called a thread in Reddit, a "topic post." This refers to the posts we see in P1. Other users could click on those topics and make their responses like these in P2:

The screenshot displays a forum interface with a topic post and several replies. The topic post is titled "老美是不是开始拉了" (Is the US starting to pull down?) and contains a picture and text discussing US actions. Below it, a comment post reads "感觉谁都震慑不住了!" (Feel like no one is intimidated anymore!). A reply post follows with the text "拜登：美国不会支持以色列的反击行动" (Biden: The US will not support Israel's counter-attack). The interface includes navigation buttons, user avatars, and a sidebar with various forum features.

P2: A Topic post with comments and replies

In P2 is a topic post named “Is the US going down?”. In this topic post, the poster uses texts and pictures to state his own opinions of whether the US is falling down from the throne of the empire. The following are the comments and replies to the comments. These are called “comment posts” and “reply posts”. When Tieba is counting, the number of posts, comments, and replies are all counted. They will also appear in the Tieba search engine. In this research, when the word “post” is used, it refers to all three kinds of posts.

IV. /AC and its History: How does Populism Shape the Public Sphere on the Chinese Internet?

A. Interest group: Before 2019’s /AC

As its name indicates, /AC focuses on the discussion of aircraft carriers all over the world. Established in 2011, the first post made by users was an introduction to aircraft carriers. The

founders of this sub-forum introduced basic knowledge of aircraft carriers. However, since there were other platforms that were focused on the military, too, the /AC received little fame and kept silent for a long time. This doesn't mean that the forum is completely dead, but a few people made posts here that say it is hard to find more posts after the starters.

The next discussions came in late 2012. This is a time mark when China put its first aircraft carrier called “ Liaoning ” into service. Although this ship was bought from Ukraine and then finished the final construction in China, this still ends the history of the Chinese Navy being without any aircraft carriers in its fleet. This event also evoked great interest in aircraft among the public. The discussion of AC (Aircraft-Carrier, all AC refers to it in the following passage) also heated up in /AC. The founders then launched several posts to answer common questions about AC and introduce information about the first Chinese AC. Many people flooded in and began more posts to discuss the ACs all over the world. They are also sharing special designs of AC:

这航母。。。

只看楼主

收藏

回复



baby疏影321

054 



[△ 举报](#) 来自Android客户端 2楼 2013-05-10 13:54 [收起回复](#)

 -Misaka: 一颗鱼雷变俩半, 战斗力不详, 防御力0.1 2013-5-12 09:29 回复

 baby疏影321: 回复 wretchedearth :没碰到中间不会成两 防御是挺弱的 2013-5-12 10:01 回复

 -Misaka: 回复 baby疏影321 :看样子不怎么实用 2013-5-13 00:21 回复

 baby疏影321: 回复 wretchedearth :要是中间的钢板强度够 挺实用的 2013-5-13 19:27 回复

 baby疏影321: 回复 wretchedearth :实用的都不拿出来看 2013-5-14 04:50 回复

P3: A post to discuss the future aircraft carriers with imagined pictures of future aircraft carriers

For the time we are discussing, the /AC is an interest group where aircraft-carriers enthusiasts gather, exchange their ideas, and share knowledge of aircraft-carriers among other people of the same interest and new followers. At this stage, politics were still far from the discussion. The focus on the ACs was mainly on the technical details and the differences between aircraft carriers from different states. The neutrality finds its place in /AC.

But for Clausewitz, “War is not merely a political act but a real political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means.”¹⁵ As one of

¹⁵ Clausewitz, Carl. On war. Penguin UK, 2003., 280

the most powerful weapons nowadays, AC surely plays an important role in political actions. Actually, ACs have become a symbol of an empire's ability to project their influence and power around the world since they could carry dozens of powerful jets and approach their opponent's coastlines as a frontline base. From this perspective, the ability of AC and the number of ACs that a state possesses indicates its power. When people compare the skills of ACs, the discussion of the difference in the state's power will inevitably arise. This also happens in /AC. The curious followers soon become interested in whether Chinese ACs will be comparable to those possessed by other states like the U.S., which leads to quarrels over the power difference between China and its opponents. Those conflicts gradually accumulated, taking over the ground of the pure discussions of ACs, and the emotions finally exploded in 2019.

B. Energy War of AC: /AC in 2019's September

In 2019, another AC called "Shandong" finished all the tests and came into service in China. This is recognized as a replica of the first AC, but it's also a redesigned version, and the first AC was built completely in China. This proved that China had acquired the ability to build full ACs. Under these circumstances, the Chinese public now became curious about the next AC, Type 003. This was believed to be the next generation of AC, which was designed and built in China. In September 2019, some satellite photos showed that Type 003 was in the dock for the final stage of construction. These photos show that 003 is completely different from the previous ones and larger than all of them.

Followers in /AC, as the enthusiasts of AC, were greatly joyful about this news. However, soon, doubts broke out: If Type 003 is much larger than previous ones, the energy power of

003 may not be the common energy (heavy oil is usually used for modern ships) but nuclear. This doubt has caused great concern among the /AC. Soon, the followers were split into two parties. The Common Energy Party (常党) and the Nuclear Party (核党). (“党” refers to party here. On the Chinese Internet, party is a word used universally by the netizens to describe a group of people with similar ideas rather than refer to a formal political organization) Generally speaking, their major disagreement was just what their name indicates: How will 003 be powered? Common Energy Party believed 003 is powered by traditional energy like heavy oil, which will make the aircraft carrier smaller than expected with a displacement of 70,000-80,00 tons. Nuclear Party held the point that 003 should be powered by nuclear energy, which is strong enough to power a huge ship with a displacement of over 110,000 tons.


This seems to be a technical question to be discussed. The size of the aircraft carrier determines its maximum power projection ability by carrying more jets and sustaining a longer sailing mission. In other words, how the Type 003 is powered decides its battle ability in the future. So, at the beginning of the debate, users focused on the technical specificities, and posters were generally cordial to one another's posts. They choose to analyze the satellite photos and academic papers to speculate the technological details of the ship:

核党证据（非石锤），2014年的文章说要研究攻克核动力...

只看楼主

收藏

回复



华农一号

现代级 9

核党证据（非石锤），2014年的文章说要研究攻克核动力航母用的大宽厚板，而上海造船厂参与其中，并且是直接用户，这当然不能证明003就是核动力，但却能证明第一艘核动力在江南，因为技术尚处于研发阶段却没提到大连造船厂

5/((65+32))=78.6+39.0+84.7=202.3MPa
 细晶强化量：晶粒尺寸按 4 μ m 的话，则强化量为：300MPa
 析出强化量：(见表 5)

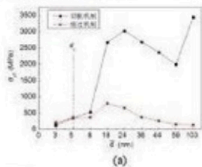
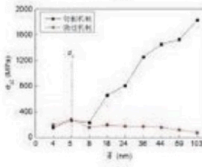



图 12 不同类型和尺寸纳米析出物对钢屈服强度的影响：
 (a)M3C, (b)MC
 Fig.12 Effect on yield strength depending on different size and type: (a)M3C, (b)MC
 尼米兹级和福特级大型核动力航母长 300 多

锭，利于缩短我国突破建造核动力航母瓶颈。

4 研究团队

根据文献^[17-19]，建议由宝钢或钢研院牵头，组织产学研用相结合的研究团队，成员包括宝钢、钢铁研究总院、浙江电渣核材、浙江通迪重工、东北大学、北京矿冶研究总院、上海造船厂。这种结合是优势互补，强强联合。

(1) 宝钢有先进的 5m 轧机和轧制工艺技术及丰富的轧钢生产经验。

(2) 浙江电渣核材是国内唯一一家大型电渣技术专业化企业，有先进的 130t 电渣炉和电渣工艺技术，能可靠地提供单重 50-100t 的航母用高品质电渣板坯，它继承了朱克教授在上重开发的大型电渣生产技术。原北科大朱克教授团队主要成员对电渣重熔和钢的综合强化机理有深入的理解；

(3) 浙江通迪重工有从德国引进的 70MN (7000t) 数控液压锻和 800KN (80t/200tm) 全液压操作机锻造设备，锻造速度快，锻压重量偏差小，可以锻造生产 150t 锻件。

(4) 东大有从事钢铁材料轧制理论基础和工程技术应用的国际知名专家及超快冷、回火快冷技术；

P4: A post on 16 Sept., 2019. This user posted an academic paper on nuclear-powered aircraft-carrier in 2014 to prove that 003 should be nuclear-powered

However, the tenor of the discussion changed over time. Since the power mode decides 003's battle ability, if it's nuclear-powered, 003 would be as powerful as Fort Class in the US Navy, but it would be weaker if common-energy-powered. As the factions have been built, the two parties now find that they are talking about something beyond the technical questions: how powerful is 003 they are expected to be?

This new question has jumped up as a sharp turn for the discussion trend. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, an aircraft carrier is a good symbol of a state's power and the ability to conduct its will. The arguments of 003 now turn to the discussion of politics since the expectation of 003 is equal to the expectation of China's state's power to some participants. What makes it more complicated is the comparison between 003 and U.S. ACs. U.S. Navy (USN) is famous for its powerful fleet consisting of over a dozen aircraft carriers and the

global interfering power the ACs provide. As the conflict between China and the U.S rises, the growing Chinese Navy becomes a perfect media for the nationalists to show their eagerness to overcome the U.S. 003 now holds their dream of defeating the USN, and it must be strong enough to fight against the most advanced ACs in USN which are all nuclear powered.

In this case, the Common Energy Party soon finds that the Nuclear Party becomes very emotional. They refused to discuss the materials further but turned to question the intentions of common energy supporters. From the Nuclear Party's perspective, the common energy supporters were trying to scorn China's power as they dared to deny China's achievements in technology development. Then, the priority of the debate is turned from technical details to defending the country's pride. The evidence from the papers and photos is nothing but the excuses made by the Common Energy Party. As the Nuclear Party became more aggressive, some Common Energy Party supporters showed concerns that there was a rising trend of populism among the Nuclear Party. While they reclaimed their support for China and insisted that this was a debate about truth rather than political positioning, they were still attacked fiercely by the Nuclear Party as they declared that the Common Energy Party was the "traitor of the states" who expected China of lacking the ability and will to protect its interest and losing the conflict between China and U.S by hoping China wouldn't have ACs as powerful as USN's:

有一部分人反对核动力是因为反对10万吨级航母，反对10万吨级航母是因为害怕重型鸡上舰，这样才能方便鼓吹中型鸡上舰，这就构成了一整套舆情机制，而这一套舆情机制的目的你一旦弄清楚了就明白为什么总有人散步003是常规动力的谣言了

Translation: Some people oppose nuclear power because they oppose 100,000-ton-class aircraft carriers. They oppose 100,000-ton-class aircraft carriers because they are worried about heavy jets. This way, they can promote medium jets on board, forming a complete set of conspiracy theories. Once you understand this, you will know why some people always say that the 003 is common energy powered.

因为这样的常派一般不说话，叫的大声的“常党”动不动就是什么“小步快跑”、“中国没有核动力技术”、“怎么可能，美国人都没做到，中国凭什么做到”……的辣鸡。对于这种屁股有问题的辣鸡，就是要把他们脸打肿 🍊

Translation: Because this type of common energy party members generally doesn't speak up, those who loudly shout about the "common energy powered" often say things like "China doesn't have nuclear propulsion technology" and "How is that possible? Even Americans haven't achieved it, what can China do?" For these types of doubters, the best response is to slap them in the face.

IP属地:安徽 🌐 [△ 举报](#) 来自Android客户端 18楼 2019-09-16 19:30

[收起回复](#)

P5 & P6: These are two posts by Nuclear Party talking negatively of the Common Energy Party. They claim that their support for nuclear power is a problem of “positioning”.

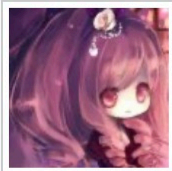
They are showing support for the state.

From this analysis, we can see how a technological problem has evolved into a problem of populism and nationalism. The Nuclear Party took the high ground with the help of nationalism and defeated its enemy by questioning their patriotism. As the debate continues with political topics, more people inside and outside Tieba are attracted to /AC. Obviously, there are more common people than specialists and enthusiasts of AC in this follower's boom. Under this circumstance, there was further less room for technical discussions, which were the last foothold of the Common Energy Party. Motivated by the nationalist emotions, /AC was flooded by more and more aggressive posts. The politicization of discussions of 003 finally introduced other political topics that were completely different from 003 and drove /AC into chaos. Near the end of September, the administrators of /AC (“吧主,” the leader of a sub-forum in Tieba, were elected by the active followers in the sub-forum rather than appointed by Tieba. This means that this is a spontaneous regulation rather than a government intervention.) launched a universal ban on the discussions of the power energy of 003 and called an end to the chaos.

But this aggressive move had reshaped the /AC profoundly. The fundamental change comes from the followers who made up the /AC. The outsiders, who are less interested in aircraft carriers, flooded in and took the ground of the aircraft-carriers discussions. In this case, the original enthusiasts were forced to leave since they found that /AC is more interested in political topics rather than data on ACs. The previous environment for AC discussions is gone, so many people choose to leave for another sub-forum for their hobby, and most of them are Common Energy Party supporters who are more concerned about the technical details of 003.

只看


我原本以为核常之争只是简单的对航母发展的讨论，谁知道



最后呵he

052C 12

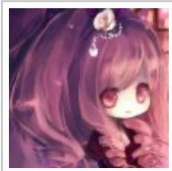
我原本以为核常之争只是简单的对航母发展的讨论，谁知道



Translation: I thought the conflict between the nuclear and common energy party is just simple discussions of aircraft-carriers developments.....

Why can't you guys leave a place for some good discussions?

IP属地:浙江 ? [举报](#) 来自Android客户端



怎么就不能让人有个好好讨论的地方啊

P7: A user was complaining about the fierce battle in /AC and decided to leave.

In this way, the Nuclear Party members finally won the war and took control of the whole

/AC. This shift has fundamentally changed the character of the AC forum. As the followers changed, their focus shifted from ACs to political affairs. Based on the result of the conflict between the two parties, the atmosphere in /AC was very nationalist. So, remaining and new-coming followers in /AC usually identify themselves as patriots and make new discussions, mainly showing their support for the government and Chinese nationalism. However, we should be aware that the past debate was motivated by the user's subjective judgments and far away from the technical problems. Other users in Tieba also acknowledged this trait. When the Common Energy party members chose the tribulation of the Common Energy Party, it was very “impressive” among other users. From then on, the /AC won its fame as populists and radical nationalists with widespread recognition.

C. AC as A Name: /AC now

After the devastating debate in 2019, with more and more people discussing political topics, /AC as a sub-forum for enthusiasts has ended. The newborn/AC is now famous around Tieba as an assembly for nationalists. If you surf the home page of it now, you can hardly find anything about the AC but find posts like this:

<p>为啥我感觉连好莱坞都在衰落</p> <p>挺奇怪的啊，以前好莱坞的经典电影数不胜数，这几年好像没啥好片了啊。 ...</p>	<p>萱萱不二🥰</p> <p>燎原之...</p>	<p>11:22</p>
<p>你承认巴勒斯坦，我就跟你绝交</p> <p>鱿鱼的处理方式，召回挪威和爱尔兰大使。中巴建交35年了，鱿鱼怎么不把...</p>	<p>夏掉掉Q 🎮👤</p> <p>瀚暮川</p>	<p>11:20</p>
<p>说句实话，我是支持伊朗的宗教保守势力的，伊朗男性喜欢对女性</p> <p>性骚扰，包括骚扰外国女性。外国女孩子穿的世俗一点，还会被当成**，是重...</p>	<p>EECS科...</p> <p>EECS科...</p>	<p>11:20</p>
<p>如何看待中俄联合声明</p>	<p>龙莎巴黎...</p> <p>西风劲旅</p>	<p>11:19</p>
<p>关于情报能力，很多人被007和各种间谍小说影响太深太严重了</p> <p>詹姆斯邦德那种，或神秘神秘的，隐藏在对方的各部门，基本都跳不出这个印...</p>	<p>牵着 - 热...</p> <p>灯笼菜刀王</p>	<p>11:19</p>

P8: A screenshot of /AC in May 2024. The followers are talking about Palestine, the


Sino-Russia Relationship, Religion in Iran, and so on—nothing about AC

Ironically speaking, in April 2024, 003 finally finished the construction. The Chinese government officially declared that this AC is commonly energy-powered. The Nuclear Party's opinion turns into a totally falsehood, but the followers of /AC don't care about this topic anymore. Nowadays, AC is focusing on showing its support for the state and other international political topics. The story for interest groups is over. However, the battle in this newborn public sphere has begun as the members who identify themselves as patriots, whose number is over 1 million (members of /AC), are trying to defend themselves and the state against the dissident.

That is, arguing with “traitors of the country” who are thinking negatively of China:

不要被它们忽悠瘸了!

只看楼主 收藏 回复



真正的大奸大恶会很伪装自己，迂回卖国的套路玩的更高级，一定要警惕大头鹰(美国籍)和七哥这样的人，他们都是同一个资本捧起来的，到底什么资本自己脑补。要自己做出正确的判断，不要被忽悠瘸了，有人在整天喊打喊杀，挑动mc，大家不要被带节奏。尤其这个讲大战略的七哥，他讲的战略没问题，但有一点他是故意带节奏，那就是中国是真的在帮助中东，而不是利用中东。而这个七哥的东西总结一句话就是中国在利用其他国家在达到自己的战略目标，这是大错特错的。如果中国是在利用他们，那就不用和菲，印冲突了，俄潜艇也不用巡航佛湾了，大帝也不用访问两个小弟了，这一切措施目的是拖住美，让阿拉伯完成任务。如果中国是利用他们，那应该暂避锋芒，让老美顺利下场阿拉伯，阿拉伯会遭殃，但能拖住老美十年，中国会利益最大化，但我们没有这么做，而是拖住老美真正的给阿拉伯创造机会，我们行的是真正的王道。

Translation (part):

Don't be fooled by them!

The real villains are very good at disguising themselves. They use more advanced tricks.

We must be cautious of people like the "Big Turban" (American nationality) and the "Seventh Brother." They all come from the same private company; imagine what kind of capital that is.

You need to make correct judgments yourself and not be misled. Some people come pretending to be sages, acting as populists to evoke social events, but don't get carried away by them. Especially this "Seventh Brother," who talks about grand strategies. What he says about strategies isn't wrong, but there's one thing he definitely won't emphasize, and that is the genuine belief in those things rather than just using the Middle East.....

P9: This is a post condemning those hidden “capitals and bad celebrities” as traitors for they are “promoting populism” with the help of foreign interferes

These posts, although very aggressive, indicate some signs of the public sphere in /AC. The public sphere, in its meaning, is meant for the people to debate and show their opinions of public affairs and politics. With these posts and discussions, /AC followers are posting about their own opinions of Chinese politics and arguing with other people about what's their own

interests. In this case, /AC now becomes a new public sphere on the Chinese Internet, which provides spaces for specific groups of people to exchange their ideas of politics and form their own groups like what coffee shops and bars did in 19th century Europe. From these places, political movements emerged and formed their own political culture and claims. The same thing is also happening in /AC, where some Chinese netizens are building up their own political thoughts and discussion styles, which could be seen as part of the public sphere.

D. Conclusions: Public Sphere with Chinese Characteristics

After going over the history of /AC and seeing how its characteristics changed, we can see a clear example of how a public sphere emerged from an interest discussion space on the Chinese Internet. In the story, we can see that there are some elements that played important roles in this shifting process:

(1) The political discussions didn't emerge without any reason in an interest group. In this example, we could say that AC as military equipment is the key reason that motivated the discussion to discover the potential for nationalism in /AC. Their symbolic meaning of the state's power makes AC a good trigger for political discussions. When talking about ACs, the difference in the technical details between the ACs from different states would guide the technology gap and eventually lead to the state power comparison. We could make a safe speculation that other kinds of concepts that have relations with states, like population, space exploration missions, and other topics, would lead to a similar result.

(2) Emotions. In the example of /AC, we could also see that emotions also played an important role in the war among the followers. To be more specific, we need to divide those

emotions into two parts.

First, the emotions in the background. All those sub-forums, Tieba, and Internet discussion spaces are some kind of replica of society in real life. That is, the social background provides the foundation for the discussion and sets its tune. In this example, we need to note that there were universal emotions of national pride among the Chinese society for several reasons, such as the success of the War against Poverty and the enlistment of Type 002 AC in 2019's China. These events and propaganda greatly strengthened the pride among the Chinese public. So when the debate began in /AC, the basic tune for the discussion was a little nationalism with the expectation for Type 003 as a stronger AC.

Second, the personal emotions developed from the discussion. During the shifting process, we noticed that emotions were reproducing themselves through more and more fierce conflict. While arguing with other members in this forum, feelings of disbelief, anger, etc., accumulate among these participants. These emotions motivated the users to shift their focus from the facts to the debate itself; that is to say, the goal of the debate changed from finding the answer to the question to winning the debate.

The two emotions, when combined, contribute a lot to the shift of /AC. The nationalist emotions in the background set the tune for politicization, and the personal emotions generated from the discussion opened the way for the technical questions discussions to be replaced with the war of positioning. This situation built the foundations for the discussions on political topics, where it is important to clarify identities.

(3) Stable community. From this example, we can see that /AC as a stable community also contributes to the formation of a public sphere. Again, we need to analyze the "stability" from

2 perspectives to explain what the “stable community” refers to here.

First, /AC and its foundation, Tieba, is a stable social media that has the consistency of time. As I introduced in the previous section, Tieba has a very long history, and so it is with /AC. During the last decade, the /AC has remained active and left abundant records and discussions. The accumulated time provides the space for the community culture to grow. In this case, the long, stable existence allows the manner and mode of discussions in /AC to emerge without guidance among the community members and, in the end, safely turn the forum into a political discussion space.

Second, and the more important part, is /AC is a political discussion space with a fixed identity. The end of the story of /AC tells us that /AC has now been recognized as an assembly of nationalists and populists among Tieba. With these marks and labels, although /AC is still an open-to-all sub-forum in Tieba, /AC somehow closes itself by setting the identity barrier. The war between the two parties led to an aggressive and radical atmosphere in /AC. In this case, only people and posts with the designated traits are welcomed in this community. Posts that are against the mainstream ideas in /AC may be boycotted and seen as trolling and restricted. This process filters the potential people who would like to take part in /AC's discussion and attracts more people who identify themselves as nationalists or populists. After all, this invisible barrier helps the /AC to grow with new members and sustain the stable common thoughts in the community as a political discussion space.

Then we could come to conclude /AC as a stable community is the last key element that shapes /AC as the public sphere. The stability allows /AC to steady its position as the rally of nationalists and an active public sphere. Also, it gives /AC the time and possibility to cultivate

its discussion culture and rules inside the community.

These elements reveal the reasons why /AC has become part of the Chinese Internet public sphere. Also, we could make a glimpse of some special characteristics of the Chinese public sphere from this example and these elements:

(1) The Chinese public sphere finds its way from topics different from politics but is related to politics. Different from the public spheres in other societies where they were built to play the role of providing participation spaces of politics for the public, the public sphere on the Chinese Internet won't take off their masks of interest group or another discussion group until there's a trigger event for the transformation to begin. In this way, the Chinese public sphere on the Chinese Internet could be greatly influenced by the real world. The tune of a public sphere could be decided by the recent events discussed in the specific discussion group. Once the trigger event appears, the discussion group will begin to show its potential for political discussions and begin the process of transformation.

(2) Emotions and arguments play important roles in discussions in the Chinese public sphere. This is perhaps the most important characteristic of the Chinese public sphere. Different from the classic definitions of public spheres, where rations and reasons are prioritized to take part in the discussion, Chinese netizens are motivated by their emotions in the discussions in the online public sphere. Usually, the emotions are rooted in their interest in the real world but are more influenced by the ongoing discussion. The interaction among the participants may heat the discussion easily when they have different opinions. The anger and distrust from the discussion may even drag the users to dismiss the truth and the original topic. As the participants are stressing the question of positioning, they must reflect on their own thoughts

and group other people with similar ideas. In the end, emotions open the floor for the political discussion as the participant now become aware of their own political position and shift their interest from the original topic discussion to the political debate.

In this case, the arguments are the common way of transforming the Chinese public sphere. While the classical public spheres are trying to build up the space, people are trying to find common ground with different opinions;/AC's public sphere rises from the ashes of the civil war inside the forum. In the story of /AC, we can see that this forum became a political discussion space after the war between the two parties. Only after this war did their main focus shift from aircraft carriers to universal political topics. /AC users used the argument to exclude the objections, purify their common thoughts, and then start the public sphere. Starting from this point, we can see the third characteristic that makes the Chinese online public sphere special is that it's highly grouped.

(3) The online public sphere is usually stable and highly organized without regulation. From the previous paragraphs, we know that the Chinese public sphere is usually built based on a stable and purified community. After the transformation process of the discussion space, we could see that from the example of /AC, Chinese online public spheres are more like political clubs rather than debate fields. /AC is not organized or has no strong regulation; a specific public sphere will hold the stable and regulated order since it has eliminated the opposition from the very beginning. In this case, one public sphere only has one type of ideology preference when it is formed. Without any regulations, the members of the specific public sphere organize themselves as an entirety, or at least it gives others the impression that they are a group of people with special traits. This is important for several reasons. First, a

public sphere with relatively closed boundaries may cause the users' ideas to become polarized. Especially on the Internet, where the participants interact with each other rather than just receive the information. They may enhance their opinions by confirming them with their comrades and their similar thoughts. Their opinions may echo with each other and make their shared belief more solid. Second, the same identity offers them the possibility to act as a whole group. When they are faced with challenges from other public spheres, the participants could react in the name of their own public sphere. This would lead to something very similar to the party politics on the Internet. In a word, Chinese online public spheres are usually far more organized than we thought and would provide more radical thoughts from its special formation process.

From the example of /AC, we can see some special characteristics of the growing Chinese public sphere on the Internet. However, there is still an interesting question: When referring to populism, what do the users in /AC mean? What's their understanding of populism? We can see that "nationalism" was referred to many times during the /AC users' debate. Do they think populism is a similar word to nationalism? Or do they have other ideas for it? What's the difference in the definition of populism between the Chinese government and the Chinese public? Do they have the same idea of populism with the world? How does the public sphere influence the formation of the knowledge of populism? In the next part, I will try to answer this question using the posts data collected from /AC and an analysis of the definition of populism from the Chinese government's survey.

V. Chinese Version of Populism: How does Populism find its own definition in Chinese society?

A. Populism as A Threat to Stability: How Does the Chinese Government See Populism?

When talking about populism in China, some scholars tend to see the CPC or the Chinese government as the leader of populism. They believe that the CPC has a long tradition of taking advantage of populism to rule the country and suppress the opponents, which makes them the largest populists in China. And among them, the latest leader of populists is Xi with his “populist reforms”:

From Deng to Hu Jintao, the CPC used a mix of suppression and the populist narrative of progress to maintain absolute control. Xi Jinping has brought a new dimension to the CPC’s populism. He has been a highly autocratic populist leader. Xi came to office in 2013 as a populist reformist. Despite his authoritarianism, he *has* addressed the country’s core economic issues. For instance, he promised to find a way out of the debt crisis and the real estate bubble. Xi also addressed the long-standing issue of corruption within the CPC, and that was a growing public concern.¹⁶

These theses tell interesting stories and are reasonable in some ways, but to discuss these points should be dealt with in another fully constructed study. For this paper, the Chinese government must disagree with those conclusions absolutely. In fact, the Chinese government has listed populism as one of the “problems of the ideology” for a long time. In 2012, the government launched a survey to investigate the trend of populism among the Chinese public. The trigger of the research is the Diaoyu Islands Issue, the conflict between China and Japan

¹⁶ Kainat Shakil, “Country Study of Populism—China”, last modified February 19, 2021. <https://www.populismstudies.org/tag/china/>.

about the sovereignty of an island in the Eastern China Sea:

Since August this year, conflicts between China and Japan over the Diaoyu Islands have been ongoing, arousing strong indignation among the Chinese people. Many cities have seen gatherings and protest marches of varying scales, with some regrettable incidents occurring as well. Overzealous actions under the guise of "boycotting Japanese goods" have emerged in several cities. In response, scholars and observers both domestically and internationally seem to generally believe that Chinese society is exhibiting a strong tendency toward populism. Some domestic media have also seized the opportunity to follow suit and hype the populist sentiment for various purposes.¹⁷

We could come to a safe conclusion that this nationalist movement is the direct reason why the government is concerned about radical nationalism and relates it to populism. Indeed, populism has a lot to do with nationalism, even radical nationalism, but is that the whole story of populism? Why does the Chinese government care a lot about nationalism while it fetches its legitimacy from it? The survey continues to provide its criteria for populism, which could show us more information about this:

Based on the common characteristics of populism and the unique political and social environment in China, we can assess whether a person exhibits significant populist traits by examining the following characteristics: 1. Degree of patriotism emotions; 2. Degree of dissatisfaction with the government; 3. Perception of threats in the international environment; 4. Degree of romanticization of daily life concepts; 5. Degree of rejection of others; 6. Degree of nostalgia; 7. Degree of social trust; 8. Degree of irrationality; 9. Degree of conservatism in

¹⁷ Survey Centre of People's Tribune, "Report of China's Public Tendency of Populism (2012)", last modified December 6, 2012, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/1206/c49152-19807772-5.html>

thought; 10. Degree of interest in political participation; 11. Attitude towards freedom; 12. Whether one believes foreign political systems are of reference value to China; 13. Confidence in the role of theory in solving social problems; 14. Degree of belief in conspiracy theories. 1-8 are the core characteristics, and 9-14 are non-core characteristics.¹⁸

Among these characteristics, we can see that Chinese official scholars (the analysts and writers who work in the Chinese government) still put nationalist concepts in the very first place, like patriotism, threats in an international environment, and rejection of others. These high-ranked populist traits show that the Chinese government cares a lot about radical nationalism in China. This is reasonable to some degree, considering the social background. During the 2012 Diaoyu Islands conflict, the Chinese public launched protests and parades nationwide. Although these parades are permitted by the government and are beneficial for the government's agenda, the public still demonstrates the potential power of destruction of the stability. Aside from the smashed Japanese cars, the Chinese public shows the ability to mobilize when facing political events. This is a great potential risk for the order maintained by the Chinese government. If the public could mobilize themselves massively, who could guarantee that this mobilization wouldn't be used against the government? As far as the Chinese government is concerned, stability is always a major concern. So when a problem like populism arises, they always care about how this political concept would affect the stability of the Chinese order. We could prove this if we look further into the core and non-core characteristics. Aside from the nationalist agenda, those official scholars choose to focus on the attitudes of the public towards the government. They would like to evaluate how populism

¹⁸ Ibid.

would affect the reputation of the Chinese government rather than if they are becoming ill-developed citizen. The evaluation of political literacy and attitudes towards foreign countries is conducted in non-core places. These are not the focus of the Chinese government since as long as the government can maintain the right to distribute the understanding of politics, the way citizens act does not matter after all.

The same concerns also come from other official scholars later than 2012. Zhao and Zhang state their worry about how populism would tear society apart with violence and irrationality. Starting from a doctor-patient conflict, Zhao and his fellow argue that online populism raises fierce emotions among the netizens. It's more possible for them to make irrational conclusions and, in the end, shake the stability of society.¹⁹ Jia and Wang also look into the reasons for the formation of populism. When talking about their concerns, they worry a lot that online populism could be shifted into mobilization in the real world, leading to public gatherings and launching protests.²⁰ All this research cares about whether populism is a strong motivation for the public to rally in the real world and shake the structure of society's order. The same thing also shows up in the Chinese official research on populism in Western countries. In those papers, aside from the regular critics of Western political structure, they all attack the chaos brought by the people who are irrational, aggressive, and mobilized. This makes the public a destructive power that affects the stability of society, which is the last thing the Chinese government wants to see.

¹⁹ Zhao Ruohan, and Zhang Hongru. "网络民粹主义形成机制与社会威胁——从哈尔滨杀医事件到李某某案." *今传媒* 22, no. 1 (2014): 31-32.

²⁰ Jia Lizhen, and Wang Yanzhuo. "网络民粹主义的形成机理和抬头原因." *人民论坛* (2021).

In a word, from the perspective of the Chinese government, the concepts of populism consist of 2 important parts: First, populism is a concept that is very similar to radical nationalism. The Chinese government is aware that populism is something very irrational and aggressive. However, in Chinese society, the Chinese government holds the point that irrationality comes from radical nationalism. It is the xenophobic emotions that stimulate irrationality, which transfers radical nationalism to the so-called populism. Second, the Chinese government also thinks that populism in China has the traits of anti-elitism and anti-government. However, the anti-elitism in Chinese populism is not rooted in the ideology but a by-product of radical nationalism. The populist movement (in this case, it's more like a radical nationalist movement), although it's pro-government, shows its potential to mobilize the public. Since the CCP does not acquire its legitimacy from the elections, it does not hope the public will be organized for political activities. The existence of a public political movement itself is a challenge to the government. So, the Chinese government chooses to suppress populism as it is a threat to the stability of the society by doing propaganda to promote anti-populism.

B. Raging Netizens: How does /AC think of Populism?

However, from the story of /AC in Chapter IV, we notice that /AC followers may have their own understandings of populism, which is somehow different from the government. To do the analysis, I choose to do a text analysis in /AC. I collected 279 posts that mentioned the

concept of “populism” (民粹主义) from 2019-2024. Here’s an example of my database:

Number	Content	Character	Anti-foreign? (Populism Showing negative attitudes) (1=yes,0=no)	Positive or negative (1=P,0=N)	Foreign? (1=Yes,0=No)
1	27/03/24 about the article of Japanese invasion , the attackers are brainless and logicless populists, but he refused a Japanese speaker's invitation	Radical nationalists/anti-intellectualism	0	0	0
2	24/03/24 about Turkey aside from picking up religion again, could only be cosplaying populism for it's impossible to let people support the religion in parliament	Anti-intellectualism/centralization by leader	1	0	1
3	24/03/24 The problem in Phillipine is populism. It forces its government to do something to battle Chinese Navy in South China's sea	Radical nationalists/anti-government	1	0	1
4	22/03/22 Populism in US is more like the history of Rome, the elites and populists	Anti-elitism	1	0	1
5	20/03/20 Populism in China is really a problem and why people are questioning the normal development of Japanese Navy	radical nationalists	0	0	0
6	16/03/24 Hegemony is a concept with elements of kings and subjectivity which could be seen in history, but in modern times it's almost invincible aside from populism	Subjectivity/centralization by leader/anti-intellectualism	0	1	0
7	15/03/24 Amercian's populism is much strong than Chinese for even foreigners are educated to love US	Imperialism	1	0	1
8	13/03/24 Be careful with India's confidence of its power, Indian's populism is very strong.	Radical nationalists	1	0	1
9	07/03/24 Eygpt's fall will be attached with the invasion into Iseral, or populism will rise and destory the government.	Anti-government/anti-elitism	0	0	1
10	20/02/24 Hitler won his basic support from populism, which is Developed from the radical-nationalism arising from the collapse of Reich	Radical-nationalism	0	0	1
11	09/02/24 Argentina is able to reclaim Falkland island as long as it devotes into radical populism.	Radical-nationalism	0	1	1
12	23/01/24 Taiwan problem is such a hotspot that if China is a Western democartic state, it would reclaim Taiwan by force much earlier.	Radical-nationalism/Anti-government	1	1	0
13	13/02/24 US cultural industry has gone into vain because it has become very populist	Anti-intellectualism	1	0	1
14	11/01/24 Trump must win 2024 election for he develops a populism led by a leader, not by raging people. It's controllable and moral.	Anti-elitism/Anti-government/	0	1	1

P10: A screenshot of part of my data from/AC

I copy the posts that refer to the concept of “populism” first, then I manually identify these posts with their own understanding of characteristics of populism with labels like “ radical nationalism, ” “ anti-intellectualism, ” etc. Then, deciding upon the primary identification, I drew three dimensions to analyze the posts to see if they are “ Anti-foreign? ”, “Positive or Negative to populism? ” or “talking about foreign affairs?”. Here are some results of the data collection:

1. The top 3 characteristics of populism mentioned by the users are: radical nationalism (183 out of 279); Anti-establishment (70 out of 279); Anti-elitism (55 out of 279). The sum is above 279 because some of them have the complex claims.

2. Most of the users are thinking negatively of populism. (241 out of 279). But the rest of them have sympathy for populism. (32 out of 279)

3. The majority of the posts discuss the populism of China. (177 out of 279)

These outcomes reveal something not that surprising. It seems that the public is sharing

the same attitudes with the government. However, if we link some of the data together, we will see something unique. As the data indicates, the majority of the people are discussing populism in foreign affairs, and most of them are thinking negatively of this concept. The combination reveals users' hidden nationalist agenda. In fact, if we read these texts carefully, we can see that the reason they attack populism is to attack foreign countries; here are some examples of the posts:

We are just waiting to see when the Anglo-Saxons and the Jews will fall out; political correctness and populism are already fighting fiercely. (No.36)

Trump, of German descent, and Kennedy, of Irish descent, are not the top-tier Anglo-Saxon elites. These two figures resort to stirring up populism in an attempt to safeguard their own positions. During the Eisenhower era, who was also of German descent, the deep state's puppetization began. (No.81)

This shows the difference between the netizens and the government here. While the government is asking the public to obey the order and keep society stable, the public is taking populism seriously as a tool to strengthen their own nationalist claims. By criticizing foreign populism, the Chinese public is trying to build up their own national pride. But when the pride grows too wild, the difference shows up as some of the posts step the way further:

Populism is the right to suppress xenophilia for foreigners. (No. 16)

Populism has both strengths and drawbacks for a society; China is not suitable for building populism now, but it may be good when it grows stronger. (No. 17)

As I said in the previous paragraph, some of the posts have sympathy for populism, 32 out of 279, but if we include the object of concern, we can see that 24 out of 32 support

populism in China. This may not be very obvious considering the limited amount of data here, but this is a sign that populism is receiving some support from the Chinese public. If we consider nationalism as a core element of populism, perhaps we could include more of these posts that speak negatively against populism, such as populists. Unfortunately, the netizens, part of the Chinese public, are putting nationalism as the absolute main characteristic of populism, which makes our metaphor very possible to prove.

In conclusion, we can see that the Chinese public is still receiving great influence from the official guidance since their thoughts on populism are very similar to the government's version. (at least for pro-government people like users in /AC) If we make the end of discussions here, we could have an easy conclusion that the definition of populism is very similar between /AC and the official definitions. It's hard to make the judgment that all the netizens in /AC know about the survey and the papers from the government, but they also recognize radical nationalism as the core definition of populism. This is not very surprising for the reason that /AC is pro-government. In this case, the participants in /AC are more open to the government's claims and may accept them easily when they are doing their own political discussions.

However, if we dive into this further, we could still find some meaningful differences. While both the government and /AC are thinking negatively of populism, users in /AC may have some different ideas of the core definition of populism: radical nationalism. As I pointed out in the previous paragraphs, /AC users are actually criticizing foreign populism to strengthen their own nationalist narrative. Under these circumstances, /AC users are behaving the opposite of what the Chinese government hopes the public would do. Although the /AC users may not

be aware of it, they are unconsciously building up their own understandings of politics. These understandings may look very naïve and primitive, but this shows that the split of political understanding of populism between the Chinese public and the government has shown up and may be enlarged in the future.

Last but not least, the populism in /AC may also be a result of the emergence of radical nationalism. As the government acknowledged, populism in China still has the trait of anti-elitism. This is decided by the dominant status of the CPC in Chinese politics. Since the CPC claims that it is the best representative of the Chinese people, it would not need political movements from the public to maintain its legitimacy, even if it's a pro-government movement. The users in /AC accept this claim and are in favor of CPC and the government; as nationalist emotions rise in /AC, they are armed with strong emotions and hate. However, the users in /AC find that they are in a dilemma: they are in favor of the government and their representative, but they are also not satisfied with foreign affairs. In this case, they project their anger against the foreign states in the name of China. That is to say, they manage to interpret the object of anti-elitism in the foreign states. This transformation allows /AC users to build up legitimacy for their populist claims.

VI. Summary and Future: A Further Split?

As the summary of the paper, we have gone through the history of /AC, a new public sphere in Chinese Internet, and see its transformation process. We can see that emotions play important roles in the formation of the public sphere. Moreover, motivated by emotions, the

users are more enthusiastic about participating in political discussions. Although influenced greatly by the Chinese government, they are also cultivating their own understanding of political concepts. In this study case, they are producing their own concepts of populism.

However, although these government supporters are trying to keep pace with the Chinese government, we can see from the analysis that they are actually producing different political discourses. The potential split has shown up as some of the netizens are welcoming populism, which is not acceptable to the Chinese government. This is a significant split as the Chinese government is still trying to monopolize the reproduction of the political understanding to maintain its legitimacy as the people's representative. If the split continues as the public sphere grows, can the Chinese government sustain its authoritarian policies in the future? Further research in different social media on the Chinese Internet may help us make a more precise prediction. However, we can not exclude the negative answers for now as we see different thoughts rising from the pro-government netizens.

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