

Re-visiting the Discursive Power of China's Generation Z: A Perspective on the Rise of New Populism in China Through Self-Media

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Abstract: While the authoritarian rule of China and its media censorship have been extensively researched, the emergence of self-media has introduced a dynamic new platform for political engagement, especially among Generation Z. This paper presents an innovative research perspective, examining the transformative role of self-media in reshaping and fragmenting discursive power, and its subsequent influence on the development of populism in China. It analyzes the Party's degree of tolerance towards self-media within its overarching media regulation policies, and studies how this emergent public sphere of politics catalyzed the transformation of populism along with broad discussions and critiques of societal issues. Focusing on Generation Z's extensive use of self-media for political engagement, the paper underscores the younger generation's disillusionment with the current state of media-driven populism under the Party's regime. The paper highlights how the lack of discursive power has contributed to an excessive proliferation of nationalism, formalism, and disparities in wealth distribution. The study offers valuable insights for future research on discursive power in authoritarian settings and stimulates discourse on how self-media simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the frameworks and understanding of populist ideologies.

Keywords: discursive power, populism, self-media, social media, public sphere of politics

1. Introduction

Over the past quarter-century, the widespread adoption of the internet has emerged as a pivotal catalyst for societal change. At the forefront of this change is the ascent of social media, marking an increased tendency among individuals to exercise their right to expression in the public domain. A critical aspect of this shift is the rise of self-media, which encompasses accounts and platforms managed by individuals or non-institutional entities. This phenomenon has become a prominent vehicle for engaging in political discourse. Analytically, self-media offers valuable insights into the promptness of information dissemination and the evolution of discursive power. Sociologically, it serves as a tool for examining societal trends and the dynamics of popular thought.

The study of self-media is increasingly acknowledged as essential for understanding the dynamics of discursive power in authoritarian regimes. With its vast internet user base, China stands as a key case study for examining self-media's role as a mediatic instrument, a platform for interaction, and a

channel for political expression [1]. Historically, China's media regulation has primarily focused on content censorship over traditional media, such as newspapers, television, and radio. This regulatory system centralized content control and assessment at the higher levels of the Party, ensuring media outputs aligned with the broader propaganda objectives of the ruling regime [2]. Previous research has highlighted self-media's emergence as a significant challenge to the censorship, presenting both the government and society with the implications of a new paradigm in study of discursive power [3]. These studies demonstrate how self-media has, to some degree, eroded the Party's control over media narratives. Nonetheless, this reduction in control does not necessarily imply a weakening of the regime's stability and authority.

This paper aims to re-evaluate the role of self-media as the principal medium for expression and political engagement among Generation Z (Gen Z) in China. Additionally, it critically explores the degree to which this emerging self-media landscape has facilitated the emergence of a new bottom-up form of populism. This ideological trend is characterized by its opposition to the oversensationalization of nationalism, formalism, and the over-reliance on economic policies that exacerbate wealth disparities.

2. Research Background

2.1. Definition

The emergence of populism stands as a salient feature in the contemporary global political arena, spanning diverse nations and political ideologies. As stated by Mansbridge and Macedo, at its most basic and fundamental level, populism is defined as the people engaged in a "moral battle against the elites", contesting "elite political, economic, and cultural domination" [4]. In the context of China's authoritarian regime, these elites often serve as the agents of the government, who hold significant societal influence and economic power. Consequently, Chinese populism also targets the "political system, national system, and elite authority," which disproportionately impact vulnerable groups and those marginalized by economic reforms [5].

Self-media represents the most extensive category within the realm of social media. Its popularity stems from the widespread availability of the internet, portable devices, and social networking services [2]. Self-media encompasses social media accounts and platforms that are owned and operated independently without any formal organizational structure. This autonomy grants individuals near-complete control over these self-media channels, blurring the traditional boundaries between content creators and receivers, who often are interchangeable and coexist simultaneously on self-media [5]. In China, the use of self-media has opened a new public space where populism articulates its political voice and redefines a collective discursive force, particularly for Generation Z - those born post-1997.

2.2. The Development of Discursive Power in China

From a conventional political perspective, the elite class typically excels in controlling the discursive power of political discourse. In authoritarian regimes, this power often manifests through government representation, morphing into a propagandistic narrative. As media are funded and controlled by elite groups to selectively report information and control its dissemination [5]. Although China's constitution and Party charter establish a political system of people's democratic rule, in practice, due to the limitations imposed by organizational structures and the bureaucratic system, actual political power often becomes concentrated in the hands of the privileged groups who hold significantly more political and social resources [6]. The Party has implemented systematic censorship of all media outlets, ensuring that all messages and news undergo scrutiny before being released to the public.

As internet and social media usage has increased in China, a number of government-sponsored media agencies started to be proactive in making articles and posts on the internet, fueling the media populism. They are separated from the Party's propaganda system as a part of the broader marketization of state-owned enterprise. While adopting a civilian rhetoric, this form of media populism primarily focuses on nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-Western sentiments [5]. The style of these articles and posts markedly differs from that of state-owned newspapers; they are generally shorter and more aggressive in reporting and critiquing on certain ideas. The media populism has fostered a polarized perspective toward the Western democratic capitalist system, adopting a nationalistic lens that highlights China's cultural heritage and history as a semi-colony in the 20th century – a period often referred to as the “century of humiliation” in the textbooks [7].

Self-media emerges as a novel platform for expression, largely unregulated and strengthening the freedom of speech at the grassroots level [5]. Unlike government-sponsored media agencies, self-media more accurately reflect the immediate needs and opinions of the public. By utilizing self-media, a greater number of individuals can directly participate in public discourse and socio-political discussions, especially Gen Z - the primary audience and contributors to self-media. For younger generation who are discontent with the monolithic narrative of traditional social media, which often combines strong nationalistic sentiment with irrational hyperbole, self-media serves as an alternate for engaging in discussions. This younger generation seeks a more balanced perspective on China's international political relations, criticizes government bureaucrats for their formalism, and concerns about the significant disparity in wealth caused by China's aggressive macro-economic policies.

3. The Role of Self-Media in Re-Positioning Discursive Power

The popularity of self-media signals an ongoing transformation in the longstanding media-state dynamic, as the China's media industry has shifted towards a market-oriented model while continuing to perform critical state functions. The “state corporatist” media system, grounded in the Party's oversight and steering clear of sensitive issues, propagates an idealized portrayal of China, often glossing over the real challenges people face [3]. Self-media challenges the traditional mode of information dissemination and expression, which is controlled largely by an elite minority. Despite the relatively modest reach of individual self-media accounts, they have shown an extraordinary ability to generate a clustering effect, rapidly sparking public attention and discussions on specific issues [8]. Self-media platforms offer a unique communicative space, enabling users to actively engage in dialogue through comments and broaden discussions by re-posting contents. This stands in sharp contrast to traditional social media, particularly those run by government-backed agencies, where users often passively browse content without deeply engaging with the topics.

Self-media revolutionizes the discursive power distribution, breaking away from the monopoly held by the elite class and thus granting the public a significant platform for expression. This shift has opened unprecedented avenues for bottom-up political engagement in China [3]. Traditional media agencies tend to showcase articles with pre-established viewpoints and a clear directional bias, where genuine public interaction and feedback on the content and perspectives are scarce. On the contrary, self-media content often stems from discussions on specific events and organically expands to encompass related topics. This model promotes individualistic engagements, encouraging participation from a wide range of social backgrounds and classes [3]. Works that resonates with audiences are frequently shared and become the basis for secondary creation, leading to in-depth discussions that bring diverse viewpoints to the fore, enriching the dialogue initiated by the original piece.

The freedom of expression enabled by self-media has given rise to constructive dialogues on topics that are often neglected or superficially tackled by the media populism. In the newly shaped populist context, the discussions have shifted to the protection of individual rights and the abuse of wealth and

power. Labor issues, for instance, have emerged as a recurrent and significant subject on Chinese self-media platforms. Gen Z disagrees with the older generation's ethos of valuing hardship as a virtue (吃亏是福), and calls for more equitable treatment of vulnerable workers by business owners and adherence to labor welfare laws [8]. The growing critiques of large corporations for engaging in exploitative practices, a common theme in self-media discussions, have gradually evolved into a widely accepted societal viewpoint.

In these situations, the government's censorship policy tends to be more relaxed, mainly because its interests do not always align with those of the business owners [9]. Although a portion of the elite's wealth is collected by the state through taxation, the excessive exploitation of individual and labor conflicts with the Party's long-term goals of sustaining governance and authority [10]. Consequently, while there is some loosening of control over media censorship and discursive power, the government still recognizes the influence and significance of self-media to a certain extent. Content featuring direct critiques of the Chinese political system or pointing out flaws in previous policy implementations sometimes bypasses stringent censorship and is allowed to spread. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable on self-media platforms popular among Gen Z, such as Bilibili and Zhihu.

4. Re-examining Populism in China among Gen Z

As Moffitt and Tormey state, the recent frequent use of "populism" in political discourse is largely due to the amalgamation of right-wing politicians and conservatives in several democratic nations, commonly associated with discussions on the erosion of democratic regimes [11]. However, the analysis of populism in authoritarian regimes requires a larger extent of variation to adapt the political environments and cultural norms. In China, the evolution of populism has unfolded in three distinct stages. The first stage emerged in the early 1980s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, when a group of critics - primarily intellectuals - entered the political discourse as representatives of the public voice. Their critique was directed at the Party for its prolonged persecution of intellectuals and the stifling of economic progress [12]. The subsequent wave of populism emerged in China in the late 1990s, marked by a critical stance towards capitalism, infused with anti-Western sentiment and a reinvigorated focus on communist ideology and nationalist re-education [7]. While these movements reflected some contemplation of political policies, their fundamental aim was to improve the Party's ruling of the state within an elitist framework. The Party, in this context, is viewed as a "paternalistic, benevolent authority," tasked with harmonizing diverse opinions and encouraging selected representatives to share their perspectives within a state-defined public sphere [6].

During both paradigm shifts in populist thought in China, leadership predominantly remained in the hands of educated elites, despite their portrayal as representatives of the civilian class [13]. This trend is often attributed to the ability of well-educated elites to effectively identify and utilize populist ideas as a form of political capital to gain support and attention. In China, this nascent form of populism has gradually evolved into a form of "bargained politics", where populist leaders selectively tackle issues that are more likely to receive engagement from government officials, making localized adjustments that both reinforce the Party's authority and garner public support [14]. This form of populism often proves to be superficial and inept, as the media tends to adopt a grandiose narrative style aimed at stimulating confrontations and conflicts instead of identifying and solving issues. During this time, elite populists often position themselves at opposite ends of the political spectrum, focusing on expanding their political clout and securing greater support from the Party [15]. They often championed a specific set of Chinese values, presenting these as far superior to Western democratic models and rigid Marxist doctrines [16]. Although both sides claim as the agent of the people, these elite factions do not necessarily focus on issues of paramount concern to the public.

Amidst growing skepticism toward the populist stances of elite-led media, younger generations, particularly Gen Z, are increasingly turning to self-media as a platform for expressing their opinions and participating in political discussions [17]. These include issues like heightened nationalism, formalism, and the unequal distribution of wealth. This trend indicates the emergence of a new populist paradigm, with self-media serving as a catalyst for change in the established discursive power dynamics within society. By rejecting represented by the elite class symbolically, the new populism incorporates a growing tendency of actively engaging in the political sphere through self-media. It represents a new form of political involvement that transcends traditional agent politics and deliberative processes.

Users of self-media break through the limitations of discussing only government-approved topics, embracing a more active role in political discourse, and thereby reasserting their discursive power. Gen Z is particularly vocal in challenging the nationalistic rhetoric that is dominant in traditional media outlets. Their critiques are not born out of a lack of patriotism; rather, they resist the misleading idealization of Chinese society and question the effectiveness of such propaganda in genuinely building national self-esteem [18]. Additionally, they are critical of the pervasive formalism within government offices and state-owned enterprises, often deemed inefficient and lacking professionalism. Most critically, Gen Z scrutinizes China's economic policies over the last twenty years. They contend that the aggressive pursuit of GDP growth has exacerbated wealth disparities, fueled a real estate bubble, and resulted in unproductive public investments. Leveraging tools like anonymous whistleblowing, public exposés, and video documentation, Gen Z utilizes self-media platforms to amplify public opinion and direct critical attention towards these issues.

The aforementioned topics addressed by Gen Z through self-media exemplifies just a fraction of the broad political discourse they have initiated in this new wave of populism. This emerging populism driven by this generation does not aim to undermine the regime, but rather to stimulate a reevaluation and adaptation in light of pressing challenges to sustain society and development [19]. This movement towards reform, indicative of democratic expression, does not necessarily challenge the Party's authority or its governance structures [20]. In fact, the Party acknowledges the role of populism in sustaining its legitimacy, particularly as the traditional state-elite-patronage system struggles to address China's ongoing economic and social issues [18]. The Party exhibits a degree of support for the bottom-up populism surge and the shift in the discursive power. Self-media has facilitated the populism by providing a unique space for political engagement and repositioning the discursive power. Thereby, the populism has narrated not from party-centric narratives, and fosters a dynamic environment for discussion and interaction at the grassroots level, contributing to the evolving landscape of political engagement in China.

5. Conclusion

China is currently undergoing a significant period of change, both ideologically and economically. As the government faces with the rapid expansion of new media platforms and the growing demands of a new generation for discursive power, it is compelled to revise its long-standing censorship practices. The Party recognizes that shaping the younger generation's sense of national identity cannot rely solely on traditional propaganda mechanisms but require a broad acknowledgment that their freedom of engaging in political discussions through self-media channels. This paper examines how self-media has shifted the dynamics of discursive power and challenged the established narratives of traditional media, aiming to place the emergence of populism among the new generation within a continually evolving political context. It acknowledges the Party's primary goal of media control yet underscores how self-media enables broader participation in the public sphere of politics and how this shift in the discursive power has been subtly endorsed by the government. By analyzing the development of populism in China and the emergence of its anti-elitist nature, the paper provides

an exemplar for interpreting the significant shifts occurring within China's censorship system. It illustrates how this bottom-up populism is injecting new vigor into the democratization process. For Gen Z, the interplay of tensions between authoritarian rule, populism, and political participation collectively shapes their discursive power and political stance.

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