

The Populism Expression of Chinese Social Media During Coronavirus Pandemic

A Case Study on FangFang's 'Wuhan Diary' Under Her Weibo Account

Zihao Chen^{1*}

¹Centre for Languages and International Education, University College London, London, UK

*Corresponding author. Email: zihao.chen.20@ucl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has broken out for more than one year. It has brought a significant impact on the order of human civilisation. There is an enormous discourse struggling on the Internet in Chinese under the pandemic context. Fang Fang, a Chinese female writer, posts her diary that records the people's life under the lockdown, which has arisen a controversy. After organising the contents of her diary and analysing the rhetoric of her and netizens, it is discovered that a populist movement is taking place during the pandemic. There is evidence that the aftermath of this vigorous online populist movement will last for a long time. This article will use text analysis method to analyse the Internet speeches, especially the most popular comments. From the interaction between the Fang Fang and ordinary netizens, it can be found that Chinese Internet populism has always existed. As long as it is allowed to be given a specific environment, this momentum can easily be ignited. Due to China's unique condition, it is difficult to determine whether it will move from online to offline in the future. However, what we can know is that social media can be used as a window to judge Chinese social trends and thoughts. This article is divided into three parts. The first part defines the notion of populism in the Chinese context through literature review. The second part sorts out different speeches on the Chinese Internet and set Fangfang's 'Wuhan Diary' posted on SINA Microblog (Weibo) as a sample. By analysing her rhetoric and the reflections of netizens, we observe the changes in people's ways of thinking and changes in political concepts behind political discourse in social media. In the third part, this article analyses the role social media playing in this populist movement under the context of the Internet era.

Keywords: Social media, political rhetoric, populism

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by coronavirus has challenged global public health safety and exposed political and cultural struggles behind it. In China, there is a phenomenon that some of the controversial topics appeared. Fang Fang, a Chinese female writer living in Wuhan, where the pandemic first broke, posted her non-fictional records during the pandemic on the SINA Weibo, a large Chinese social media platform. Her online diary was trendy at the beginning and won a large number of supports. However, as time passed, the public opinion toward her had a dramatic change. She was then caught up in an argument and even started a scolding war with people who disagree with her. From the rhetoric used by her and the comments under her posts, it can be outlined

as a manifestation of populism. It is difficult to determine whether she intends to set up her political stand, but from her speeches, it can be conducted that she is affected by populism. Because from the first post she mentioned about the pandemic, she mentioned that she is blocked by the SINA company before and said that 'high-tech [company] is not weaker than the plague' (25th January 2020), she set up an opposite stand with a big firm, such discourse has a specific standpoint. This is the beginning of her diary. And then, she started to use the word 'people of Wuhan' in her post on 27th January 2020 and praised someone who comes from Shanghai swearing on a pharmacy which sells face masks very expensive. In short, in her words, it can be seen that she was influenced by populism to a certain extent even if she regards populism as the target of the attack to a certain extent in

her later Weibo (29th March 2020). She has received much influence from Chinese cultural and political traditions. Social media has become an appropriate platform to show her and her views and collisions with different positions.

The populism in the Chinese context is different from that in Euro-America countries [1]. After the People's Republic of China (PRC), a populist narrative is emphasised, by which the sense of social status, or at least to say, belongings of ordinary people is unprecedentedly improved. The word 'people' has been given a strong political colour, 'mass line' is legitimised as a principle of government power [2]. 'People' here can be seen as a political discourse. It is used to express a certain political stand. Chinese populism is an ideology rather than political means that in democracy regime. Therefore, when the 'people' is used in the text, it inevitably is marked as a political sign. In the Mao Tse-Tung's era, elite intellectuals demanded to be close to the masses and think from the masses' perspective. This is regarded as the impact of populism on Chinese cultural and political traditions [2]. As a person born in Mao's era, the writer Fang Fang inextricably knows how to use the rhetoric 'people'. Even if she is not aware of this problem, it inevitably casts a populist veil on her remarks. In the Chinese political tradition, moreover, paternalism is a very important source of political legitimacy [3]. People expect that someone can make the decision for themselves. It can be inferred from this that Mao's populism is precisely in line with this demand, requiring elite intellectuals to serve the people. It seems that this political tradition continues. Fang Fang takes 'people' as her primary rhetoric, and its popularity must come from people's expectations of paternalism.

At the beginning of the pandemic broke out, mainstream media led by the government reported that unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan was a rumour, and the 'people who spread rumours' have been investigated and dealt with by the law. Nevertheless, this kind of report has a considerable deviation from the hospital exposed on the Internet. People appear to distrust authoritative mainstream media, trying to find something that can comfort their souls and speak for them. From Miao [1], in China, Chinese netizens are often unable to comment on domestic politics directly due to censorship and regulations. People have nowhere to vent their discontent and depression under the pandemic. Fang Fang used documentary literature to make a voice different from official channels on the Internet, which is very popular among netizens. In addition to literary descriptions, almost all of her writing will fall to the political spectrum, criticising the government and the system. This is also an act of 'voicing for the people'. Thereby, she attracted many attentions. The social media provides an opening and efficient way to make an interaction between her and other netizens. Fang Fang seems to have become a representative of paternalism leaders inadvertently, and

people have given her significant legitimacy in her writing.

Under this circumstance, the social media, which attracts more people than traditional media by with more interactivity and many-to-many communication [4], can naturally become a supporter of the netizens. When examining the rhetoric of the comments under Fang Fang's posts, the words 'government', 'power', 'public' and 'citizen' are used most frequently. For example, the most-liked two comments with 72 likes and 57 likes which under Fang Fang's repost on 2:44 pm 27th January 2020 (the original post has been deleted), one claim that 'power does not bow to science' and 'the problem with the Wuhan Government is that when more than a dozen doctors are infected, they still tell the public that there is no human-to-human transmission'. It is apparent that they set up a conflict between ordinary people and the authority. From Mudde and Kaltwasser [5], this strategy is always be exploited by left-wing populist for winning the support of people. Indeed, social media here provide a sample to investigate the clue of Chinese populism, with its more decentralised and democratised characters, many political expressions could be more straight and clarified.

2. THE POPULIST DISCOURSE IN CHINESE CONTEXT

It is generally considered that China is a one-party authoritarianism state [1, 6, 7, 8], lack of fundamental populism. Most research on populism is based on the liberal-democracy regime, whatever in Europe or Latin America [4, 5, 9]. Hence, from Miao [1], 'a non-establishment populist leader is unlikely to rise under the CCP's tight control, the CCP continues to rely at least partially on populist strategies to legitimise and secure political support'. That means using the paradigm in researching populism in democracy countries will lead to a misunderstanding. As a one-party state, the CCP dominates the political ideology, from Townsend [2], after the foundation of PRC, Mao Tse-Tung, the leader of CCP, as a populist, legitimised the 'mass line' as an essential political principle. The mass campaign as a political legacy has always been one of the CCP's working methods. Actually, from the late Qing period to 21st century, 'states have legitimated themselves on the claim that they possess a uniquely paternalistic character, based on adherence to traditional political-cultural rules of good governance [3]. CCP us the mass line to construct a people-centred discourse as 'everything for the people, and everything depends on the people' to realise its paternalism. Therefore, populism here is not only indicating the political approach but also as an ideology. Those who use the rhetoric related to 'represent the interests of people' will be supported. A Chinese populist discourse could be outlined as the mass line as a populist political principle has been intensely consolidated. Those

who violate this principle will automatically lose the discourse power and be identified as the enemy of the 'people'. The word 'people' here has a political implication. Obviously, when Fang Fang uses it, it is implied that she volunteered to stand with ordinary people and serve them.

From the post on 28th January 2020, she mentions she criticised the rigid system and said that 'the virus does not mind who is the people and who is the leader' and use '下场' (xiachang, which means a bad end) when talking about the Mayor of Wuhan. Therefore, in her text, there is a strong tendency to oppose between ordinary people and the elite, and describe it as stubborn and rigid. In any case, she herself seems to be a leftist. Since by Abts and Rummens [9], '[leftist] identifies the people in socioeconomic terms as the working class exploited by a bourgeois elite' and '[the] right-wing populist movement that refers to ethnonational characteristics to identify the people with the (ethnic) nation'. However, from the speeches of netizens, they use a nationalism discourse to attack Fang Fang, it looks make no sense here for using the 'left' or 'right', even if examined Postill's debate on Gerbaudo's definition of 'left' and 'right' with 'centrist', because whatever which kind of populism, they always repeated the threaten from 'the other' like terrorists, establishment or 'radical' populists [10]. It is only can be cleared that, Fang Fang is undoubtedly faced with a populist attack, which think of her as a figure who stands with 'the others', like 'cooperating with hostile forces come from America', indeed, from her own post, she mentioned 'populism', and claim that 'the ultra-left has merged with the populism' (29th March 2020). Nevertheless, the definition of the spectrum of her and her opponents is different from those researches which define 'left' as emphasising the conflict between common people and elites or ruler class, 'right' as highlighting the conflicts between the natives or nationalities and other external threats [5].

From the text named 'Fang Fang Diary, A Twilight of New Enlightenment' which Fang Fang reposted on 30th March 2020, the author implied that Mao-era as 'a time with poverty, dictatorship and barbarism', and blame it to the ultra-leftism. So, basically, in Fang Fang's opinion, she defines ultra-leftist as those who obsessed with and championing power. (28th March 2020 and 29th March 2020). However, from the rhetoric around Fang Fang's posts and comments, it is very suitable to be placed in the context of populism research. Fang Fang did not notice that those extremist remarks are more easily expressed with the use of social media. In the democratisation space given by social media, whether it is for her or against her, both are more aggressive and polarised. This is also a characteristic of the development of populism in the Internet era. In her later diaries, she used more and more emotional rhetoric and aggressive vocabularies. Moreover, she herself emphasised her attitude of not setting up a stand, which has become the

target of joint attacks from different opinions. Using leftists or rightists to accuse others in a populist debate, in the end, it seems to make themselves stand on the opposite side of everyone.

3. THE CHANGES OF THE NETIZENS' ATTITUDE TO FANGFANG'S POSTS ON SINA WEIBO

In the beginning of Fang Fang's Diary, she often used a plain tone to record her life under lockdown, and she made a detailed description of emotions, including specific names and events. In the post on 29th January 2020, at the end of her text, she claimed that she would stand with Wuhan's government, but she replied to a comment that says 'many people are infected only after believing the official rumours' with 'yes!'. It seems that the words she uses in her post are a kind of satire.

The post on the next day (30th January 2020) ignited the anger of the people. In this text, she said through her relationship, she contacted the local traffic administration bureau and sent her niece and niece's mother out of the country to Singapore. This happened when all of Wuhan is locked down. Even in this post, she recorded part of what happened at that time, like a child with cerebral palsy starved to death at home due to her father being quarantined and blamed that 'China has a disease more serious than the coronavirus, but there is no, doctor and no one can cure it'. She used these words to express her concern for society and people, but what she mentioned at the end of the post about her use of relationships with government workers still aroused people's anger. The replies to the top comments on her post are all attacks on her using 'privilege'. Even if Fangfang repeatedly claimed that she was an ordinary person and the government did what they were supposed to do, netizens still expressed their anger. In the next day's post (31st January 2020), she reposted and laughed at some posts that others had attacked her. These posts contained the rhetoric of 'class enemies', 'landlord class' and 'tenant peasants'.

In fact, after that, in her posts which are still visible, she has been dedicated to recording ordinary people's lives during the lockdown period, and most people in the comments expressed their approval and support. There is no evident opposition or attack. Her strategy is to record from the perspective of an ordinary person and the mainstream discourse narrative, publish it on the Internet, and interact in real-time. Many netizens leave comments below, praise or ask for help. She often sends some positive signals on her posts. On 4th February, she affirmed other people's doubts about the hospitals and attacked the rigid leading cadres. Fang Fang once called for the expropriation of party schools on the Internet and called for others to use state-owned enterprises and the three major operators to implement efficient pandemic

prevention and control measures. Most of these measures have been implemented.

However, besides that, most of her posts eventually rose to political discourse. On 24th February 2020, she posted 'The touchstone for testing a country's civilization is its attitude towards disadvantaged groups'; on 25th February 2020, its first public response to the dispute was with Changjiang Daily, she attacked a comment as 'Brain Disabled' under the post which comment that began on 28th February. The concept of 'ultra-left' was mentioned for the first time in the post on 28th February.

Moreover, a 'notorious' picture of cell phones that belong to the people who died of coronavirus all over the crematorium ground were confirmed to be rumoured, which said Fang Fang posts it. The original text is no longer available, but we have seen the rumours refuted by GuanChaZheWang (Observer Net), a very conservative political attitudes online entity [11]. Many politicised rhetoric began to appear in the diary on 29th February, such as 'collective silence'. Furthermore, in the high praise comments, the complaint against the illegality of 'deleting posts'. Then began to quote Martin Nimora's famous saying. The controversy is considerable in the diary on 1st March. This diary discusses a Chinese medicine practitioner named Li Yuehua, who is accused of 'illegal practice'. She advocated overstepping the statutory medical admission system for doctors and excusing the doctor who was punished for illegal medical practice. In these discussions on social topics, Fang Fang seems to have always had the urge to portray herself as a populist, according to her rhetoric, she has always emphasised the content of anti-establishment system and the content of popular sovereignty. These contents are very consistent with a left-wing populist [10, 12]. Even though she is accused of taking advantage of privileges, she does call herself an 'ordinary people'.

Indeed, it is distracting to ask whether she does play or not a politician way. In her narrative, it can be seen that she does not have a fixed political view. However, we can regard her diary as a medium and platform, in its rhetoric without a fixed position and netizens' responses. It depicts the portrait of populism. From the post on 21st March, she mentioned 'Japan has good sanitary conditions and some foreign governments give people money straight', these words caused great dissatisfaction among netizens. This stimulated a nationalist sentiment. In fact, in the previous posts, she emphasised the 'tearing apart Chinese society' and the existence of 'ultra-left' forces. These politicised narratives on social media platforms can easily cause opposition among people. (need literature supports). In her posts' comments, more and more narratives related to the 'other' such as the United States or Japan appear, someone, proposed to convict Fang Fang for the crime of 'subverting state power.

On 23rd March, the 'American Diary' appeared online. This diary imitated Fang Fang's tone of describing the United States' pandemic situation, aiming to satirise Fang Fang. The main body of this diary is a Weibo account called 'Diba Guanwei', which is very popular among young people and also a conservative Weibo account. Fang Fang called the people surrounding this Weibo, a 'mentally handicapped group'. The diary on 24th March 2020 is the last one. Since then, the controversy surrounding Fang Fang has continued for a long time. Judging from the analysis of comments on the Internet, most of the other party's negative comments are describing them as conflicting with their interests. From 'The Voice of the People' to 'The Traitor of China': The Ups and Downs of Fang Fang's 'Wuhan Diary' [13].

This article does not intend to analyse Fang Fang herself. After all, she is a writer who uses social media to convey her feelings and opinions. It can even be said that she has no political demands, and it is inappropriate to observe her from a political perspective. The primary purpose of this research is to analyse the rhetoric in Fang Fang's discourse, that in the context of social media era, especially in China's social media, all users are forced to real-name systems, so that people can avoid irrational speeches brought by the anonymity. This can be used to dig into what is happening in Chinese society and how people view society.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT A CATALYST, BUT A WINDOW

It is found in this research that social media's role is indeed magnificent. Fang Fang is able to attract social media attention because she becomes a medium outside the mainstream narrative. In terms of content, Fang Fang does not have a fixed political proposition. She adheres to the idea of an elite intellectual in traditional concepts, actively intervening in social affairs and expressing her views. This is in line with the traditional Chinese concept of intellectual responsibility and the realisation of paternalism political ideals [14]. In this aspect, the populist proposition is not valid. Moreover, the articles she forwarded are the voices of some elite intellectuals arguing around this writing. Even in her words, she shows a kind of contempt and contempt for the younger generation. This is also a product of traditional paternalism and hierarchical society. This is inconsistent with the concept of populism in the context of a liberal democratic society.

The controversy around her narration is found to be in line with the contemporary populist model. For example, the division between the left and the right, the opposition between the elite and the general public, and the conflict between 'self' and 'the others'. Fang Fang may not realise it. Even in published, forwarded, and commented texts, the concept of 'ultra-left' comes from Mao's era's legacy. It is not appropriate to describe the

ideological and political trend of contemporary Chinese society. However, from netizens' comments, it is basically in line with the populist trend of thought in globalisation context, even if it may incorporate many Chinese characteristics, such as the inheritance of populism from Mao's era and the deep-rooted paternalism obsession.

Social media is like a mirror to examine the modernisation process of Chinese society in the political spectrum. After all, populism is a product of modern society, which is inextricably linked to democracy. We can see the competition among various social forces in various disputes on social media, and the process of the competition is used to consider the progress of China's democratic construction.

5. CONCLUSION

It can be found that, in some extent, populism is a modern interpretation of traditional Chinese political philosophy. Since ancient times, China has had a political philosophical tradition that puts people first. Today, it can be interpreted as 'people's sovereignty'. Chinese intellectuals naturally have a kind of enthusiasm for politics, so they are often accompanied by political discourse in their narratives. From the perspective of modernity, its narrative emphasises the rebellion against authority and the support and solidarity for the people at the bottom. Fang Fang's speech was gradually replaced by the mainstream media, and she lost supports. It can be proved that in Chinese society, who can speak for the people and be the enemy of privileges can gain political legitimacy.

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