

Cyberbully and Cyber Populism in China's Social Media: A Case Study on Zhang Zhehan's Visit to the Yasukuni Shrine

Yiyang Lyu^{1, *}

¹ The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England

*Corresponding author. Email: guanghua.ren@gecademy.cn

ABSTRACT

Some scholars believe that populism takes the form of cyber populism in China because of the different social environment from the Western culture. The rise of social media has led to the development of cyber populism, along with cyberbully which has raised the social risks of individuals. By analyzing the visit of Chinese star Zhang Zhehan to the Japanese Yasukuni Shrine, it is argued that Chinese cyber populism is going to extremes, the neutral voices and evaluations are not allowed on the Internet. This article attempts to prove that the cyberbully brought by cyber populism is threatening everyone, cyber populism has become a tool for propaganda and a threat to free speech.

Keywords: *Cyber Populism, Social Media, Cyberbully, patriotism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Populism first appeared in Tsarist Russia, pursuing absolute equality, opposing social disparities, empathizing with the weak, and resisting oppression [1]. With the progress of science and technology and the development of the economy, China has entered a period of social transition, the widening gap between the rich and the poor has deepened the social contradictions, the mass and elite classes are separated, under the influence of the development of the Internet, the trend of cyber populism spread in China's social media [2]. In China, where the Internet is widely available with 904 million Internet users nationwide, social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat are becoming tools for people to participate in politics and express their opinions, more and more populist opinion leaders are speaking on Weibo. Because China's electoral system is different from that of the West, populism takes a different form [3]. China's cyber populism trend is often reflected in some social events, behind the cyber populism contains the people's concern for rights, the call for social equity and justice, as well as its demand for interests [4]. Yet when cyber populism is too extreme, the power of this group can easily be exploited or spiral out of control, leading to cyberbully, the trend of cyber populism in social media raises social risks for individuals. Every party to the event of cyber populism has been destroyed by the cyberbully of real life, every

netizen has the risk of being destroyed by the cyberbully of life since the development of cyber populism.

Yasukuni Shrine is dedicated to many soldiers killed in the "War of Aggression against China" and "Pacific War", visiting Yasukuni Shrine has become a means for Japan's right-wing to draw people's minds. Yasukuni Shrine is not a mere historical site, but a political arena. Since former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in 2015, there has been a lot of discontent in China, which considers Japan's visit to World War II prisoners an insult to China. Japan's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine evokes the history wound of China which was left behind in World War II, the public equates visiting Yasukuni Shrine with betraying history. Thus, when news of Zhang Zhehan's suspected visit to the Yasukuni Shrine spread on social media, the public convicted him without giving him a chance to explain, the extreme cyber populism that raised the risk of everyone being attacked online. As an objective existence, the risk is closely related to society and culture. In the process of human development, the risk is always difficult to be completely cut, people can only prevent risks [5]. With the strengthening of social contradictions in China, the trend of cyber populism has been growing in social media, gradually evolving into an emotional catharsis, cyberbully, human flesh search phenomenon occurs from time to time, cyber populism has gradually become a way for the public to vent their

emotions. These phenomena increase the daily risk of the public.

The visit of Chinese star Zhang Zhehan to the Yasukuni Shrine has sounded the alarm for the public, cyber populism has become a tool for the capitalist class to control public opinion, extreme populism is not conducive to maintaining social stability. Social media is closely integrated with the lives of the general public, the harm that the general public suffers in social media will also affect real life. Through an analysis of Zhang's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, this paper proves that the development of cyber populism in social media has raised the social risk of individuals. This paper analyzes the concepts of risk society, cyber populism, and cyberbully, explores the relationship between them. By analyzing Zhang's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, try to prove that cyber populism in China's social media breeds cyberbully and increases social risks to individuals. China's cyber populism is no longer a manifestation of the public's pursuit of fairness, but rather a force of public opinion used to exclude dissent.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Risk society

Risk is a kind of "unknown" in life. These unknowns not only refer to possible natural disasters but those daily risks that we don't care about or ignore which are more likely to cause people's anxiety [6]. Compared with natural disasters or terrorism, human-made daily risks, such as smoking death, and falling from a ladder are more likely to cause worry [7]. For the public, daily risks are the most unbearable, the cyberbully brought about by cyber populism is the daily risk that people have to face. In economic theory, gains and losses are part of risk [6]. Due to the development of cyber populism, the public's pursuit of fairness has overcorrected any speech on the Internet may become misinterpreted or a reason for the attack. According to Murphy's law, things tend to develop in the worst direction, people cannot guarantee that they will not be the target of cyber violence. If there are potentially serious consequences, then the precautionary principle is the best way to protect yourself [6]. The development of cyber populism has increased the daily risks faced by the public and therefore needs to be contained. The public faces rare major accidents, disasters and global terrorism, epidemics, and dangerous substances risks through mass media news every day, these are the risks of the risk society, that is, the risks that cannot be controlled and dealt with as individuals or local communities [7]. The daily risks are different, the public can take precautions by discovering dangers in advance. More and more people have avoided online violence by reducing their speech on social media. Risk research and risk management cannot eliminate the uncertainty of

this world and its future, but it may help improve our skills in dealing with uncertain events and their adverse consequences [8].

The emergence of social media has facilitated the lives of the general public and has also increased social risks. Social media removes communication barriers and allows everyone to participate in democratic governance everyone has the right to speak, but not everyone can make good use of these rights [6]. On the contrary, social media has led to the abuse of power and increased the public's social risks. Social media is depriving us of the trust and comfort we once had with each other, replacing the interpersonal friendship, physical and emotional support we once received from each other with virtual connections [8]. When the public is more dependent on social media, the harm that people receive in social media is more likely to affect real life. Social media deprives us of our self-control and ability to think independently, makes us vulnerable to being tricked into joining any group that publishes abnormal information that will amuse our ears and our senses without evaluating the consequences [7]. The virtual nature of the Internet allows the public to dare to speak freely on social media, it also makes the harm on the Internet invisible. People cannot accurately judge how much harm words will bring to others. Social media has become a source of public pressure, leading to public depression and anxiety [9].

2.2. Cyber populism and cyberbully

Over the past few decades, China's economy has grown dramatically entering an era of unprecedented material prosperity and social transformation, public emergencies occur from time to time and social media growing rapidly [10]. The richness of material life does not bring about fairness, on the contrary, the social class is polarized, the differences in people's living standards of different classes gradually expand [11]. Cyber populism developed rapidly during this period, the pursuit of justice became more and more urgent, the public tried to influence the state's handling of public events by expressing their views on social media. It is worth noting that this phenomenon occurs because the civilian population lacks reliable official, institutional or legal channels to deal with grievances and seek justice [10]. In this context, social media has become an important channel for public political engagement, social media users have expressed their views on political and social issues through comments that are also manifestations of cyber populism.

Historically, populism has been active in reform, often leading to revolutionary manifestos, and changes within democracy have kept populism alive [12]. This has led to the development of populism with the changes of the times. Yet, despite its history, populism is still not well defined and is more often used as a tool

to woo the masses [12]. Politicians from different positions give different meanings to populism for a variety of purposes, the position of populism depends on who takes advantage of it. Resentment is fertile ground for populism, which has grown by shifting the blame to the state or government [13]. The rapid development of the Internet in China has attracted a large number of Chinese people to express their views through the Internet, and there is growing evidence that the Internet has become a communication tool for Chinese individuals to express dissent, which is rare in a highly controlled traditional media environment [12]. The special circumstances have also allowed cyber populism to develop in Chinese social media and gradually to extremes. The empowerment of individuals on the Internet provides progressive activists with more opportunities, to tell the truth, and make it possible to a more open, participatory, democratic, informed, just and equitable world, however, it also serves as a haven for invasion of privacy, dissemination of fake news, and the cultivation of hateful and extremist ideas [14]. Chinese cyber populism has become a tool to be used, the public's intention is to supervise the government through the network, the pursuit of real life is difficult to obtain the fair. Yet, people through the power of public opinion to distort the facts to achieve private purposes, cyberbully is frequently formed. Politics has turned to social media where fake news, spam, and gossip are abundant, the sources of this information are unpredictable and unmanageable [13]. Therefore, cyber populism in the spread of true and false information to the extreme. Chinese social media users not only represent the traditional view but also play a role in information sharing in public emergencies, so the role and influence of these users in public emergencies are growing [15]. As information flows in both directions on interactive social media, the public can learn about public emergencies to address their right to know, also can relatively free to express and exchange views on public emergencies, even to express their voices to thousands of people through opinion leaders. Virtual communities and networks of individuals on social media are empowering individuals and groups to put pressure on the authorities, however, social activism continues to reach new heights as public awareness increases and affected individuals and groups become increasingly willing to take extreme measures to engage with the State [13]. The power of public opinion has grown in the development of cyber populism, it also has gradually lost control. Cybernationalism often permeates the Chinese Internet, especially at specific times of dispute with other countries [10]. In recent years, China has shifted its attention from economic development to Taiwan's secession and foreign policy with Japan and South Korea, but the government has less influence over public opinion [13]. Under the long-standing culture of patriotism, the public's attitude towards Japan and South Korea is generally hostile

which has also affected relations between the countries. The use of cyber populism can incite popular national hatred. On the Internet without rules or control, it is easy to control public opinion from a distance by spreading fake news or propaganda [15]. In Zhang Zhehan's case, public opinion has also been manipulated traces, so the public's views will be so "unified". When populism is used as a weapon, its power can easily destroy people's lives. In China, cyber populism has become a tool of use, which is dangerous.

2.3. "Exploitation" in the Information Age

Hegel thinks that "alienation" is the embodiment of capitalist ontology; Marx thinks that "alienation" is an inherent feature of capitalism [16]. There is no denying that the exploitative nature of capitalism makes the characteristic of "alienation" inevitable. Although it has entered the information age, the exploitation of capitalism has never stopped, which led to the alienation of goods. The commodities purchased by the masses in the information age have also been digitized, the lives of the masses are surrounded by digital information [17]. In the consumer society, the public pays for goods other than the necessities of life [16]. Marcuse believes that people's needs are divided into "real needs" and "false needs" when people cannot distinguish them, the needs of others and social needs to transfer their own needs, these false needs eventually formed the alienation of consumption [18]. Under the influence of false demand, the public has made too many irrational consumptions to satisfy their spiritual desires. In this case, people are sold to the public as a digital commodity, and exploitation is triggered. Chinese traffic star is a new type of commodity, they equate the number of fans with commercial value, then transform the value into cash. Fans increase stars' business value by buying a lot of products that the stars speak for, so the career development of these traffic stars is closely related to the fans. These fans are immersed in the consumption of false needs and do not consider whether it is suitable for them [17].

As a product of capitalism, social media enriches itself by taking value from users, which is "exploitation" [18]. The emergence of stars as commodities has made exploitation a more convenient channel for implementation. Weibo, a social platform where fans comment or retweet favorite stars, the act of making them more commercially valuable through "doing data" is an "exploitation". These fans call themselves "data workers", which is the exploitation of people by social media. Because Internet users are often paid little or no in exchange for the value they create for the form of social media platforms, the rate of exploitation is close to infinity [18]. When stars are sold to the public as commodities, they are doomed to lose their voice to the masses. In public events about public figures, public

figures are always falling to voice their own opinion. The "alienation" of labor, consumption, and commodities in the information age makes people "exploited" all the time. It's a tragedy no matter as commodities or customers.

3. THE DANGERS OF CYBER POPULISM

3.1. *Star: Alienated commodities*

In the information age, the development of social media has enabled people to interact online, and fans and stars can interact through social media [17]. The star has a huge following on social media, but at the same time, his words and actions are under public scrutiny. On the one hand, as a public figure, he needs to maintain a good image and deliver positive energy to the public. On the other hand, fans have a lot of demands on their idol with the intention of making him the perfect symbol. Social media creates stars with so many tags that fans like the virtual symbols behind them, not the real people. The rise of cyber populism has made the public and fans more and more critical of the star, any explanation is not accepted if he has any moral problems, because people no longer take them as a real person but as a symbol.

The development of social media has allowed the public to search for spiritual satisfaction in virtual, capitalizing on surreal concepts to create "idols" for fans, overindulged fans will consider their idol to be their "god." However, people have their own emotions, cannot live into another group of people's hope, ultimately leading to a deformed market. Fans and stars no longer simply love each other's work, but through morbid consumption, the other side into their own imagination. Thus, at the time of the incident, Zhang Zhehan had little chance of justification, the market easily gave up the flawed commodities.

3.2. *Public opinion leads to the tyranny of the majority*

After the end of World War II, Chinese people has a strong national hatred of Japan, under the guidance of the authorities, people thought that not forgetting hatred is the best reward for the martyrs. This hatred has once again stirred up after the Tokyo Olympics, with the public unable to stand Japan's strong showing on either side and athletics bringing friction between the two nations. With the Tokyo Olympics unfolding and anti-Japanese sentiment on Chinese social media at an all-time high, the Zhang Zhehan incident has become the trigger for public sentiment. As a star, Zhang Zhehan's high income so that he was divided into different classes by the public; as a public figure, his words and deeds by the public strict supervision. When his morals were

questioned, the public easily denied everything about him, especially his ties to Japan.

Incidents involving moral entanglement can most stimulate cyber populism, which is keen to seize the high moral position [19]. With the development of social media, the influence of public opinion on the government is increasing. On August 13th, the topic of "Zhang Zhehan visits Yasukuni Shrine" caused heated discussion on Weibo. Zhang Zhehan himself posted an apology on Weibo, indicating that he did not understand the Yasukuni shrine. Since there is no concrete evidence to show whether he visited the Yasukuni Shrine, the People's Daily commented on the matter as "apologize and make up the lesson." Public opinion did not stop, instead, the public questioned whether the official speech was too mild. Then the People's Daily deleted the more moderate word "make up lessons" and finally banned Zhang Zhehan's social account on August 15. Public opinion played an important role in this incident. Zhang Zhehan did not violate Chinese laws whether he visited the Yasukuni Shrine or not, it was the public's comments that would be tried on him. In the post-truth era, emotions come first, and the public's reason is dispelled [19]. The public's criticism of Zhang Zhehan is based on a personal imagination. People preconceived that he was a traitor and tried him through the power of public opinion. This kind of tyranny of the majority caused by public opinion increased social risks. Everyone may become the next object to be judged by public opinion. The development of social media has increased the power of public opinion. Internet populists' pursuit of fairness through public opinion will only lead to verbal violence.

3.3. *Blind patriotism*

As a medium, the media conveys information to the public, which is the channel for the masses to understand the world [20]. Although the purpose of journalism is to seek truth, journalists will inevitably take their own opinions when they edit news, and the "pyramid structure" of news represents the screening of information by journalists. Mainstream media and social media have become the main venues for political debate [11], and the mainstream media have mostly expressed anti-elite views as mouthpieces of the ruling class [12], which have had a subtle impact on the general public. Under the influence of the media, the public decided that artists are "goods" that make money through fans, the success they are given by fans and can naturally be retracted by fans. The value and effort of the stars themselves are selectively forgotten, and this "forgotten" also occurs in public figures which makes them extremely easy to be targeted by cyberbullies.

Patriotism is a dangerous virtue that is easily abused [21], perhaps Chinese patriotism is a tool used by the ruling class. It is patriotism that leads the public to

believe that sacrifice for the collective is a valuable thing, but this value only works in the collective, not individual [21]. In the epidemic of coronaviruses, the media spared to promote medical staff as "white angels", as if it is their duty to give their lives for the masses. There is no denying that these medical staffs are heroes of the Chinese public, but it is difficult to define whether they were "voluntarily" heroes or "unconsciously" sacrificed. In China, it is common for governments to create "civilian heroes" through the media, which can increase public cohesion. Patriotism is a preference for a particular group that is the embodiment of racial discrimination [21]. Chinese people who are surrounded by patriotic propaganda, find it hard to recognize that racial discrimination is rooted in their minds. This is one of the reasons why the ethnic conflict between China and Japan has never been alleviated. As early as August 12, related graphics and texts about "Zhang Zhehan is a traitor" were spread on various social media platforms. This is not a randomly selected day, the event will be available fully discuss before the anniversary of the Songhu Battle on August 13. Anti-Japanese sentiment in China has always been strong, it reached a peak after the Tokyo Olympics.

Therefore, the incident became the fuse that detonated the anti-Japanese sentiment of the whole people. Therefore, the whole incident was artificially guided, some people used the anti-Japanese sentiment of the public to achieve their own goals, the development of cyber populism has become a tool for some people to use public opinion. Cyber nationalism is often spread on the Internet in China, especially during disputes with other countries [16]. The public proved their patriotism by insulting Zhang Zhehan, which is a kind of blind patriotism. This incident can reflect that under the influence of cyber populism, the masses excessively pursue morality, resulting in a zero-sum game phenomenon, neutral views are not allowed to exist. Chinese Internet users are avid content producers compared with their counterparts in a transnational environment, they have a much higher contribution and dependence on user-generated content on the Internet [16]. When moral justice is higher than procedural justice, and the masses are trapped by narrow and blind patriotism, it will only generate violence on the Internet, it is difficult to have a positive impact on real life.

4. CONCLUSION

An analysis of Zhang's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine reveals that cyber populism has brought cyberbully to China's social media, which threatens every netizen and raises the social risks of individuals. The development of China's cyber populism makes public opinion show of control trend, everyone is at risk on the internet, anyone can become the next target of a cyberbully, thus, cyber populism has increased social risks. The

development of social platforms has made opinion leaders for those who do not have the sense of responsibility and knowledge reserves, public opinion as a tool to profit from these opinion leaders. China's cyber populism is supposed to involve the masses in politics and pursue fairness, while the private or prejudice of opinion leaders has generated verbal violence on the Internet. Although social media platforms have blocked the accounts of some opinion leaders to reduce the channels in which they try to manipulate public opinion, there are still many influential opinion leaders active on social platforms. Cyberbully fuelled by cyber populism has threatened every netizen, which also is a precursor to the loss of control of cyber populism. How to strengthen the regulation of cyber populism is an urgent problem to be solved. When cyber populism becomes a channel for the masses to pursue fairness, rather than a force against others, the risk to individuals in the network will be reduced, and the public will be able to speak freely on the Internet again.

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