

Cahiers du CEVIPOL **Brussels Working Papers**

3/2019

Right-wing populist discourse on
Chinese social media: Identity,
otherness, and global
imaginaries

Chenchen Zhang



Centre d'étude de la vie politique (CEVIPOL)

Université libre de Bruxelles

Campus du Solbosch

Avenue Jeanne 44 – CP 124

1050 Bruxelles

T. +32(0)2 650 4039

Editrice/Editor: Amandine Crespy, acrespy@ulb.ac.be

Archives et consignes pour soumission/Archives and instructions:

<http://cevipol.ulb.ac.be/fr/cahiers-et-notes/les-cahiers-du-cevipol-brussels-working-papers>



Chenchen Zhang is a postdoc researcher at the Recherche et Etudes en Politique Internationale (REPI) and the Centre for East Asian Studies (EASt), Université libre de Bruxelles. Her research interests broadly lie in social and political theory, political geography, and international relations. She has published in journals including *Citizenship Studies*, *Geopolitics*, *European Journal of Social Theory* and *Journal of Historical Sociology*.

E-mail: chenchen.zhang@ulb.ac.be



Abstract

The last few years have seen the emergence of a right-wing populist discourse on Chinese social media that combines the claims, vocabulary, and style of right-wing populisms in Europe and North America with previous forms of nationalism and racism in Chinese cyberspace. In other words, it provokes a similar hostility towards immigrants, Muslims, feminism, the so-called 'liberal elites', and progressive values in general. This article examines how, in debating global political events such as the European refugee crisis and the American presidential election, well-educated and well-informed Chinese internet users appropriate the rhetoric of 'Western-style' right-wing populism to paradoxically criticise Western hegemony and discursively construct China's ethno-racial and political identities. Through qualitative analysis of 1,038 postings retrieved from a popular social media website, this research shows that by criticising Western 'liberal elites', the discourse constructs China's ethno-racial identity against the 'inferior' non-Western other, exemplified by non-white immigrants and Muslims, with racial nationalism on one hand; and formulates China's political identity against the 'declining' Western other with realist authoritarianism on the other. We conclude by conceptualising the discourse as embodying the logics of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies. This article 1) provides critical insights into the changing ways in which self/other relations are imagined in Chinese popular geopolitical discourse; 2) sheds light on the global circulation of extremist discourses facilitated by the internet; and 3) contributes to the ongoing debate on populism and the 'crisis' of the liberal world order.

Keywords: right-wing populism; China; Chinese identity; liberal world order; discourse analysis



1. INTRODUCTION

The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive.

- U.S. President Donald J. Trump's speech in Warsaw, Poland, July 2017
It's about the instinct of survival. The West has lost this instinct, but China has it.
- A Zhihu posting on the question of 'Muslims in the West', May 2016¹

On 20 June 2017, World Refugee Day, UNHCR posted a brief message raising awareness about the plight of displaced people around the world through its official account on Weibo, a preeminent Chinese social media platform. This modest post was soon bombarded with some 30,000 negative comments, and the reaction was so overwhelming that the organisation's goodwill ambassador was eventually forced to come forward and clarify that she had never supported China to take in any refugees. The widespread anti-refugee sentiment in Chinese cyberspace² and the exceptional popularity of American President Donald Trump in the country (Hernández and Zhao, 2017; Carlson, 2018), at least before the trade dispute intensified, draws our attention to the emergence of a right-wing populist discourse that combines traditional elements of Chinese cyber-nationalism, which has been much discussed in international studies (e.g. Breslin and Shen, 2010; Hughes, 2000; Cairns and Carlson, 2016), with the ideology, vocabulary, and style of right-wing populisms in Europe and North America. In other words, it provokes a similar hostility towards immigrants, Muslims, multiculturalism, the so-called 'liberal elites', known as the 'white left' in Chinese online communities (Zhang, 2017), and progressive social movements in general. However, compared to its Western counterparts, right-wing populist discourse in China engenders a different global imaginary and integrates Chinese discontents with liberal hierarchies of the international order (Zhang, 2016) into expressions of nativist and authoritarian ideologies. Although reproducing many of the claims and fictions of nationalism, racism and Han supremacism that have long existed on Chinese internet (Cheng, 2011; Leibold, 2016; Pfafman, Carpenter and Tang, 2015), the emergent right-wing discourse also rearticulates national identity and self/other relations in new ways by shifting focus from historical memories of 'pride and humiliation' (Callahan, 2009; Gries, 2004) to debating political norms and values of the present.

¹ Q4, answer ID #76415692. See Appendix I for information on all the online discussion threads quoted in this article.

² According to *Global Times* (Li, 2018), an online poll from June 2017 showed that 97.3 percent of over 210,000 respondents were against 'China taking foreign refugees' and the figure was 97.7% in a similar poll from June 2018.



Puzzled by this unexplored phenomenon, this article examines how, in debating global political events such as the European refugee crisis and the American presidential election, well-educated and well-informed Chinese internet users appropriate the rhetoric of 'Western-style' right-wing populism to paradoxically criticise Western hegemony on one hand, and discursively construct China's ethno-racial and political identities on the other. We also interpret the discourse as popular narratives of global order, which diverge in certain ways from (and converge in other ways with) official and academic discourses that largely monopolise accounts of what 'Chinese' visions of global order are. The study is premised on the recognition that the configurations of right-wing populist discourses in both Western and Chinese contexts bear an inextricable relationship to the hierarchies and paradoxes immanent to the liberal world order. Explicating the anti-Western Eurocentrism in 'Chinese' perceptions of world order helps us think beyond the East/West dichotomy and comprehend the complexity of 'non-Western agency' (Hobson and Sajed, 2017).

The article explores the construction of self/other relations and global imaginaries in online populist discourse through qualitative analysis of 1,038 postings retrieved from Zhihu, a social media platform for knowledge sharing that has been actively engaged in debating Western politics and especially the 'white left'. Using analytical tools from critical discourse analysis (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009), the study shows that the online debates not only exemplify the global circulation and reproduction of extremist discourses facilitated by the internet, but also, more importantly, demonstrate the changing ways in which Chinese national identities and the global order are imagined by pro-globalisation and anti-liberal urban netizens. Specifically, in criticising Western 'liberal elites', the discourse reconstructs China's ethno-racial identity against the 'inferior' non-Western other, embodied by non-white immigrants and Muslims, with racial nationalism on one hand; and formulates China's political identity against the 'declining' Western other with realist authoritarianism on the other.

The narratives of global order criticise Western hegemony and perceive China's rise with a prudent optimism. Taken together, we argue that the discourse epitomises what we would call anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies. It embraces and perpetuates assumptions of Western capitalist modernity on development, free market, competition, and reason to dismiss the self-reflexive sensitivity of liberal democracy as irrational, moralistic and destructive, which in turn is used to underline the superiority of the 'pragmatic' authoritarianism of the Chinese regime. Furthermore, it converges with the party-state's strategy in turning anti-hegemonic sentiments and realist perceptions of geopolitical rivalries into excuses to eliminate difference and homogenise imaginations of Chinese political identity.

The article proceeds as follows. We start by clarifying the term of right-wing populism and its relationship with exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism. We then point to the immediate and broader contexts in which right-wing populist discourse began to emerge in Chinese cyberspace, noting that the European refugee crisis and the



American presidential election were key events that reinforced previous forms of ethnic nationalism and stimulated the circulation of transnational extremist discourses on Chinese internet. After introducing our methods and data, the main section summarises the major themes and ideological features of the discourse, which at its core reaffirms racial nationalism and realist authoritarianism through diagnosing the problems of Western 'liberal elites'. It then scrutinises the ways in which China's ethno-racial and political identities are constructed therein against the threatening other and the declining other respectively. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies for domestic politics and international relations.

2. DEFINING RIGHT-WING POPULISM(S)

The past two decades have seen an explosion of academic interest in the term 'populism' due to the success of what are conventionally called 'populist radical right' or 'extreme right' parties across Europe and most recently triggered by the unexpected outcome of the Brexit referendum and Trump's election (e.g. Mudde, 2007; Caiani and della Porta, 2011; Wodak, 2015; Gusterson, 2017). Populism, however, is notoriously difficult to define. It has been variously described as a political and communication style (Moffitt, 2017), a strategy of mobilisation and ruling (Weyland, 1999; 2003), a 'thin' ideology in the sense that it does not offer a comprehensive or coherent belief system and is often combined with other, leftist or rightist, ideologies (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2014), or a combination of all of the above. Despite the conceptual diversity, scholars working with a minimalist definition of populism generally understand its core proposition as 'an appeal to "the people"' against 'the established structure of power' or the ruling elites (Canovan, 1999: 2; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2014). For democratic theorists, the populist claim to represent the will of 'the real people' against the 'corrupt elites' (Mudde, 2007: 23) may be considered both a threat to liberal democracy and a symptom of its failures. So long as 'the people' functions as a floating signifier that can be attached to any groups and subjects, constructing its boundaries and exact meanings is a crucial aspect of populist politics.

The object of inquiry in this article is specifically limited to right-wing populism, which along with other variants of the term has been used to describe right-wing parties and movements that share certain similarities and take different forms depending on national political systems and socio-economic circumstances (Pelinka, 2013). Mudde identifies three core ideological features in his analysis of what he calls populist radical right parties in Europe, namely nativism, authoritarianism, and populism³. Our focus on right-wing populism as ideology and discourse also emphasises these features. The nativist aspect of right-wing populism is associated with the term 'nationalist populism'.

³ Harrison and Bruter (2011) view 'negative identity' and authoritarianism as the two core dimensions of extreme right ideologies. This is a minimalist approach and does not touch upon the wide-ranging economic agendas of extreme right parties.



In addition to the antagonism on the vertical level between 'the people' and the 'elites', nationalist populism also presupposes a polarised opposition on the horizontal level between an imagined, 'homogenous ethnic community and its ethno-cultural other' (Stavrakakis et al, 2017: 2; Brubaker, 2017), embodied typically by the figure of immigrants, refugees and Muslims in the rhetoric of populist right parties. According to Stavrakakis et al (2017), some of the parties in contemporary Europe labelled as 'populist' are better categorized as 'nationalist' and are only 'secondarily' populist⁴. Pelinka similarly notes that the populist Zeitgeist in contemporary Europe is not so much about mobilising 'against the (perceived) enemy above' than against the perceived enemy from abroad, as anti-elitism is directed against those 'deemed responsible for Europeanization and globalization' (2013: 9).

Compared to exclusionary nativism, theoretical reflections on the authoritarian dimension of right-wing populism are much more diverse⁵. Researchers of populist right movements in Western liberal democracies tend to use authoritarianism to refer to attitudes, beliefs, and values, rather than regime types. Influenced by social psychological approaches (Altemeyer, 1981; Feldman, 2003), authoritarianism is understood as a preference for 'uniformity and order' and a punitive approach to defending established rules and norms (MacWilliams, 2016: 717; Mudde 2007). Identifying authoritarianism as one of the two core components of extreme right ideology, Harrison and Bruter (2011: 100-02) further differentiate a social conception, which emphasises traditional values and a 'previously existing utopian order', and an institutional conception of authoritarianism, which calls for a strong state and especially strengthened state power to fight 'disruptive elements in society'. In Inglehart and Norris's account of what they term populist authoritarian parties (2017), authoritarianism signifies the cultural backlash against postmaterialist values, or values prioritising 'autonomy, self-expression and the quality of life' such as feminism, environmentalism and pluralist society (Inglehart, 2007). As to be shown below, institutional authoritarianism and criticisms of progressive values also constitute a core ideological dimension in the online discourse analysed here.

Empirical studies seeking to explain voters' support for right populist politicians in European and American contexts have suggested various individual-level and structural factors such as racial resentment, authoritarian values, and economic anxiety (e.g. Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; MacWilliams, 2016). While there is no space here to review this literature in detail, suffice it to note that both economic and identitarian explanations

⁴ Earlier research on populist parties in Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2007) also shows that anti-immigration, rather than grievances over economic changes or elitism, is what unites right-wing populists in Europe.

⁵ Although the term 'authoritarian populism' has been increasingly used in both academic debates and news media, we have opted not to use the concept here as it is defined rather differently in studies of Latin American populism and in the Marxist literature (Hall, 1985).



have an international dimension. For the populist right, globalisation and regional integration are blamed for both economic grievance and increased share of immigrants and ethnic minorities in society. Mutz argues that the perceived decline of 'US global dominance' also contributes to the sense of status threat among 'traditionally high-status' Americans (2018). Perceptions of the international order play an even more explicit role in the framing of extreme right ideologies on Chinese social media. If expressions of racialised nativism and authoritarianism in the 'heartlands' of the liberal order are linked to discontents with economic globalisation, they are entangled with a revolt against Western dominance in the normative and political hierarchy of world order in Chinese cyberspace.

Before proceeding, a caveat about the use of the term 'populism' in the Chinese context is in order. As to be shown below, this research focuses on Chinese criticisms of Western left-leaning elites that 'creatively' reproduce and develop the anti-elitist, xenophobic, and anti-liberal narratives characteristic of right-wing populist discourses in Europe and beyond. Although these discussions adopt a populist style in the sense that they rhetorically refer to the interests of 'ordinary people' versus the manipulation of political and cultural elites, they are presented as observations and diagnosis of Western politics and do not seek to advance a populist, anti-establishment agenda to challenge the domestic regime. The discourse rather instrumentalises anti-elitist expressions to legitimate ethno-nationalist, anti-liberal, and anti-Western claims. That said, it is not unusual that authoritarian and hybrid regimes rely on forms of 'official populism' as a tool of governance and regime stabilisation⁶ (Robinson and Milne, 2017). In Russia and China, official populist rhetoric is used to legitimate the status quo by framing Western pressure for political reform and 'imported ideas from abroad' as detrimental to the interests of the people (Robinson and Milne, 2017; Tang, 2016). The popular discourse against the 'white left' thus in this respect converges with the officially-sanctioned campaign against universal values and 'Western' ideologies. Both popular and official visions, however, involve an authoritarian 'schizophrenia' that demands pluralism on the international level while discredits dissensus, in the name of resisting Western hegemony, in domestic politics.

3. FROM CYBER-NATIONALISM TO RIGHT-WING POPULISM ONLINE

While it is not the purpose here to offer causal accounts of why some Chinese netizens are attracted to the rhetoric of the populist right, the approach of critical discourse analysis requires us to position texts, utterances, and discourses within their immediate context of situation and the broader socio-political context. The following domestic

⁶ Much of the 'populism in power' literature is focused on Latin America. However, the governmental use of populist rhetoric in China bears more resemblance to the 'official populism' in Russia examined by Robinson and Milne (2017).



and international developments are most pertinent to contextualising the online discourse in question.

First, the rapid development of online communication has created a dynamic digital space that allows citizens to participate in public deliberations that are otherwise impossible. Research suggests that new media in China has both given rise to opportunities of political contestation and enabled state apparatuses to develop sophisticated censorship and persuasion measures to strengthen authoritarian rule (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015; Yang, 2014; Han, 2018). The internet has contributed particularly to the diversification of nationalistic consciousness and become an important channel 'by which the most globalised segment of the Chinese population, namely, educated urban youths, expresses the multifaceted discourse' of nationalism (Zhao, 2007: 193-197). The extreme right end of nationalistic internet users have been drawn to cyber-racism (Chang, 2011; Frazier and Zhang, 2014) and Han supremacism (Leibold, 2010; 2016). The former reinforces globally imagined racial hierarchies and the latter applies a similar binary of progress and backwardness to the relationship between the Han majority and ethnic minorities within China. These forms of racial nationalism would be reaffirmed and amplified in the online debates on immigration, race, and Muslims in Western societies.

Secondly, China observers have drawn attention to the emergence of a 'hybrid socialist-neoliberal form of political rationality' (Sigley, 2007) in the transformation of economic structures and modes of governance in post-reform China (Zhang and Ong, 2008; Bray and Jeffreys, 2016; Zhang, 2018). Wang Hui views the marketisation of society as enabling the formation of a 'capitalist consensus' based on a negation of revolutionary legacies and a politics of depoliticisation (Wang, 2007; Duara, 2008). Under this neoliberal-authoritarian hegemony, sociological research finds that patterns of value changes do not accord with Inglehart's assumption that economic growth and individual-level affluence are likely to lead to support for postmaterialist and liberal values. Survey data show that postmaterialist values have been declining since the mid-2000s, and high-income groups, who have benefited most from the economic status quo, are no less 'xenophobic, authoritarian or more desirous of democracy' than low-status groups (Zhang, Brym and Andersen, 2017; Brym, 2016). On the other hand, however, citizen activism has become increasingly visible in the limited space of civil society, especially in areas that are not perceived as politically destabilising: first in environmentalism and then extended to feminism, LGBT rights and animal welfare in recent years. The visibility of new social movements, though highly oppressed in reality, on the internet can be mobilised by conservatives to generate a backlash against postmaterialist values. In fact, online criticisms of Western 'liberal elites' have made their way to debates on domestic issues, being adapted by internet users to ridicule Chinese nationals sympathetic with liberal egalitarian values.

Thirdly, China's rising economic and military powers have led netizens to be more confident in the authoritarian status quo and disenchanted with the ideal of



democracy. The immediate context in which Chinese internet users began to pick up the vocabulary of the populist right was the European refugee crisis and the US presidential election of 2016, which on the one hand prompted netizens to familiarize themselves with the anti-refugee and anti-liberal rhetoric of Western conservatives, and on the other hand were seen as epitomes of the inevitable decline of Western democracy. The internet plays a significant role in the 'globalisation of extremist discourse' (Baumgarten, 2017) and the transnationalisation of right-wing populist mobilisations (Caiani and Kröll, 2015). If the attention to the refugee crisis on Chinese social media was centred on anti-immigration, Islamophobic, and racist framings, then the subsequent discussions on the American election revolved more around criticisms of postmaterialist values and the disdain for 'political correctness'. As the explosion of social media platforms radically decentralises the production and consumption of (mis)information, internet users can easily access and reproduce globally circulating narratives such as Islamophobia, white supremacy and anti-feminism. Resembling the transnational Islamophobic discourse elsewhere (Horsti, 2017), for example, the theme of 'Muslim rape' and the depiction of Sweden as a country 'destroyed by Muslim immigrants and feminists' also emerged in Chinese cybersphere.

4. DATA AND METHODS

Based on participant observation conducted on major social media websites since 2015, we opted to collect textual data from Zhihu, a question-and-answer website known as China's biggest knowledge sharing platform. This is because 1) the website hosts extensive debates on refugees, Trump, and Western 'liberal elites', which are the main nodal points in which right-wing populist discourses in Chinese cyberspace are anchored; and 2) comparing to other platforms, Zhihu contains more quality, argumentative and information-rich postings that are suitable for qualitative discourse analysis (Patton, 2002). The sampling strategy is therefore purposive. Demographically Zhihu users are in general better educated and better paid than average internet users in China. Market research shows that typical Zhihu users are university students and professionals living in first-tier cities, with 80% possessing a bachelor's degree or above⁷. Some of the participants in the debates are international students or recent immigrants to Europe and the US, who would describe their first-hand experiences with 'condescending' liberal elites and various problems allegedly caused by the prevalence of postmaterialist values. For our purposes, the discussions on Zhihu can best illustrate how the segment of Chinese internet users most informed about Western politics utilise right-wing populist discourse to reimagine national identities, otherness, and global order.

The quora-like website consists of user-generated question threads which are labelled with 'topics' (*huati*) or hashtags. Each question threads contain any number of

⁷ Regina Yang, All You Should Know About Zhihu And Its Commercial Value, <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/zhihu-commercial-value/>, accessed 25 September 2018.

'answers' (*huida*), and each answer is followed by comments (*pinglun*). **Figure 1** shows the distribution of posts (including all questions, answers and comments) under the hashtags 'refugees', 'Trump', and 'white left' between 2015 and 2018. Similar to 'social justice warriors', the 'white left' or *baizuo* is a derogatory term invented and mainly used by their opponents to refer to individuals in Western societies who endorse progressive values such as feminism, multiculturalism, equal rights movements, and environmentalism⁸. We opted to analyse question threads within this topic rather than the other two because discussions about the 'white left' bind together a variety of populist right narratives such as anti-elitism, anti-immigration, racism, and market liberalism. This could therefore give us an overview of major topics and ideological features of emergent right-wing discourses on Chinese internet. Three representative question threads on the 'white left' (Q1-Q3, Appendix I) were chosen based on their clear reference to the Chinese self-image and the large number of answers they had attracted. At the time of data collection (June 2018), the questions received a total number of 1,190 answers, of which 1,038 were deemed to contain relevant textual information⁹, and these answers received over 11,744 comments. Answers are typically lengthy and informative essays directly addressing the posed question such as 'why most Chinese people dislike the white left'. Comments are short remarks made with respect to each answer. We included all 1,038 textual answers, consisting of 363,445 words (354, 654 Chinese characters), in the analysis yet excluded the comments as a large share of them are irrelevant to the posed questions and due to concerns of feasibility.

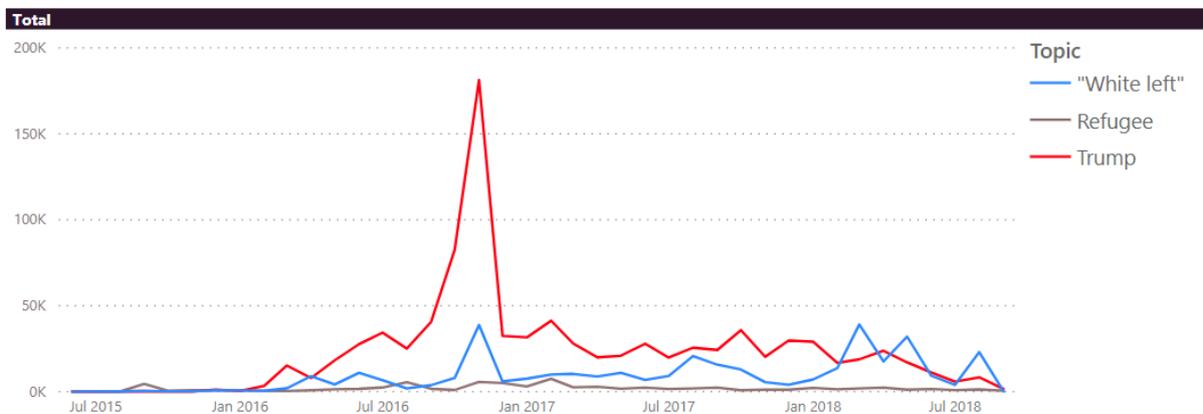


Figure 1 Distribution of posts under the topics of Trump, refugees and the 'white left' (July 2015 - July 2018)

A two-step strategy of analysis is adopted broadly in accordance with Krzyżanowski's (2010) 'multilevel approach' that integrates 'entry-level' and 'in-depth' analyses. In the first step, the dataset is manually coded in NVivo, and the objective is to map key

⁸ Similar

⁹ Within the limits of feasibility, we disregarded the 152 answers that contain only images, videos, hyperlinks, irrelevant texts, and metaphorical expressions beyond our capabilities to interpret. This particular study is therefore biased towards texts and does not take into account visual imagery.



topics and tendencies in the 'overall framing of the discussed issues' (Krzyżanowski, 2018: 103). In the second step, in-depth interpretative analysis aims to decipher the ways in which us/them distinctions and self/other relations are articulated. A range of analytical tools developed in the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to discourse analysis are drawn upon. For example, the communicative strategies of *nomination*, which in DHA concerns how persons and groups are referred to linguistically, and of *predication*, which denotes the 'discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena' and so on as 'more or less positively or negatively' (Reisigl and Wodak 2009: 94), are central to the demonisation of 'blacks, Mexicans and Muslims' (*heimolü*) as a collective out-group. The DHA also situates a text in relation to four levels of 'context': the 'immediate, language internal context'; the intertextual relationship between 'utterances, texts, genres and discourses'; social and 'institutional frames of a specific context of situation', and the 'broader socio-political and historical context' (Reisigl, 2017:53). Special attention is paid to intertextuality and historical contexts in our analysis. For instance, the proliferation of the term *baizuo* itself is instrumental to establishing the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between different issue areas ranging from refugees to feminism. The genesis of racial nationalism in the formative years of the modern Chinese nation and contemporary popular discontents with the Western-dominated liberal order are historical contexts indispensable for comprehending the online discourse. Finally, the broader interpretation also draws on the author's everyday observation of extreme right discourses on leading social media websites including Weibo and Zhihu.

5. IDENTITY, OTHERNESS, AND GLOBAL IMAGINARIES

If those whose first reaction after their country gets in trouble is to go to other countries, eat for free, behave like masters, keep committing crimes, and act extremely aggressive are devils, then the white left is Pandora who unleashed devils [sic] from the box. (Q1, #336678085, 8-3-2018)

This section presents the findings by first outlining the key topics, themes and rhetorical strategies emerged in the discussion, and then explicating how different dimensions of self/other relations are constructed and global imaginaries mapped. As **Figure 2** shows, the vast majority of the sampled postings take a negative attitude towards the so-called 'white left', while a small percentage of responses are 'ambivalent'. The latter means that these users either question the validity of the term as such or agree that the group exists, yet their contribution should be acknowledged despite their flaws. The topics, ideologies, and strategies of argumentation in Chinese criticisms of the 'liberal elites' overlap to a large degree with those of right-wing populist discourses in the West (Wodak, 2015; Krämer, 2017)¹⁰. The most salient issue categories are

¹⁰ Not all those critical of the 'white left' explicitly support right-wing ideologies. Some only claim that they disdain the arrogance and hypocrisy of liberal elites without appealing to, for example, exclusionary nativism or racism. In most cases it is nonetheless difficult to untangle the

immigration/refugees, race/racial relations, and Islam/Muslims. Questions related to the economy and social welfare are also important. Discussants either criticise redistributive social policies and the welfare state itself or assert that immigrants and ethnic minorities (bar Chinese immigrants) are welfare dependents and a burden to the economy. Other topics deal with postmaterialist values such as feminism, environmentalism and LGBT rights (**Figure 2** and **Figure 3**). Prevalent ideological features include anti-elitism, nativism, racism, Islamophobia, authoritarianism, market liberalism, and Social Darwinism, which can be further categorised into racial nationalism and realist authoritarianism.

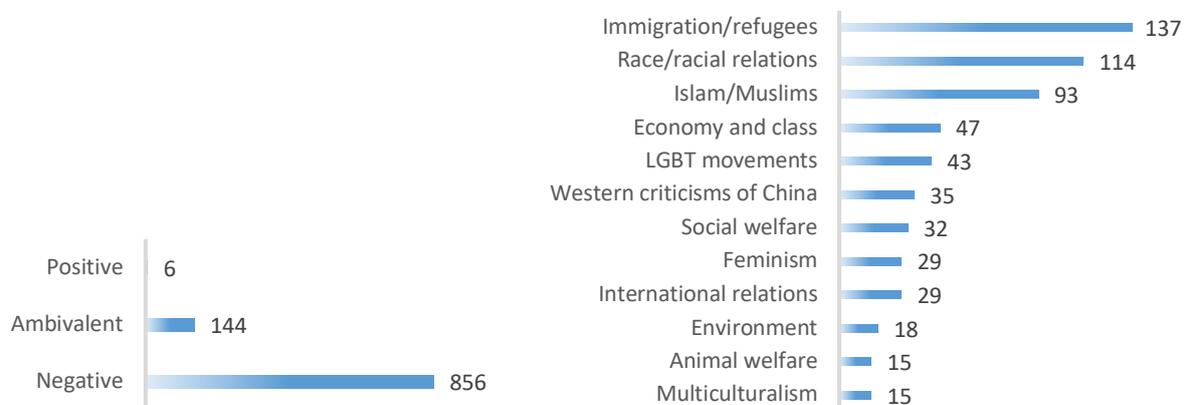


Figure 2 Attitudes towards the 'white left' and count of postings by topics discussed. Note that one posting may discuss multiple issues.

First, discussants take an anti-elitist stance by *naming* a presumably identifiable group of well-educated, left-leaning elites the 'white left', and characterising its members as either stupid or evil. The 'stupid' pack are said to be naïve, simple-minded, and ignorant of 'real problems' in the world, whereas the 'evil' ones are corrupt, deceptive, and hypocritically endorsing progressive ideas only to stay in power. Many refer to their own upbringings and claim that they could relate more to the 'ordinary people' in the US than American liberal elites do. A famous phrase from Emperor Hui of the Jin Dynasty (259 – 307 AD) – 'why don't they eat meat porridge?' – is mentioned in 33 answers¹¹, and has become a paradigmatic catchphrase for Chinese netizens to ridicule Western elites, who, just like in the US, are seen as 'out of touch with or

contempt for elite hypocrisy from racist hatred or stereotyping against certain population groups. A small fraction of criticisms are from the left, which generally echo left critiques of (neo)liberalism, such as Fraser's (2016) thesis on what she calls 'progressive neoliberalism'.

¹¹ It is said that when Emperor Hui was told that the common people were dying in a famine, he asked 'if there aren't enough crops, why don't they eat meat porridge'?



indifferent to the concerns and problems of ordinary people' (Brubaker, 2017). However, anti-elitism as such remains a secondary ideology in our interpretation of the texts. Users criticise Western 'liberal elites' not because they are elites per se, but because what they stand for - in this framing, what they stand for are immigration, Muslims, and an egalitarian society threatening hierarchy, law and order. As the following postings put it:

We're just ordinary people concerned about the changes in the world because these changes will affect us. The ultimate reason why I hate the white left is that they've turn my worldview upside down. They want a world in which everyone would have freedom; everyone should be equal; both humans and dogs would be protected; and there wouldn't be billionaires or paupers. (Q2, # 127579111, 20-10-2016)

If someone thinks freedom is more important than security, they must be either a lunatic or a criminal. (Q1, #376124045, 25-4-2018)

This brings us to the core ideological features in the online debates: racial nationalism and what we propose to call realist authoritarianism. Racial nationalism refers here to a kind of exclusionary ethnic nationalism that defines national belonging primarily in ethnic and cultural terms, and that views ethno-cultural others as 'fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state' (Mudde, 2007: 19). The narratives of ethnic lineage and cultural homogeneity are also associated with implicit or explicit formulation of ethno-racial hierarchies and the naturalisation of cultural differences. Taking the forms of xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia, racial nationalism undergirds the discussion on issues of immigration, race and Muslims in both Western and Chinese societies. Realist authoritarianism prioritises materialist values, defined by Inglehart (2007) as those focused on economic and physical security, to the extent that it regards political values and goals that are deemed irrelevant to economic development and societal/national security as at best useless and at worst destructive. Realist authoritarians are inclined to justify their preference for authoritarian values (e.g. strong authority, strict social order, and punitive justice system) and contempt for morality, pluralism or democracy in utilitarian/pragmatic rather than normative terms. Such a worldview often entails a social Darwinist belief in survival of the strongest (*ruorouqiangshi*), which is on the international level preoccupied with competitions between nations/races/civilisations, and, on the domestic level, linked to a market liberalism emphasising self-reliance, competition and individual performance.



and *baizuo-shengmu*¹². As an effect of this linguistically constructed equivalence, for example, Islamophobic discourse also commonly features anti-feminist claims. It is noteworthy that the vocabulary is essentially misogynist, as these derogatory compound words carry evidently feminine connotations and are used to attack users expressing a sense of morality or empathy. Just as in other countries¹³, the 'liberal elites' are portrayed as effeminate, sentimental, and irrational, whereas their opponents claim to favour reason, law, and force.

5.1 The threatening Other and ethno-racial identity

Although the main themes, ideologies, and rhetorical strategies seem familiar, the fundamental difference between extreme right discourses on Chinese internet and those in Western societies lies in what kind of us/them oppositions are presupposed and reiterated. If central to the latter are polarised oppositions along the line of white/non-white identities and Western/non-Western cultures, then the former adopts, reinterprets and instrumentalises these antagonisms to construct a threatening other (the non-Western other) in relation to China's ethno-racial identity, and a declining other (the Western other) vis-à-vis China's political identity (**Table 1**). The two dimensions of othering are inextricably interrelated, as in the eyes of these observers, the decline of the Western other is caused precisely by its inability to take a hard line on the non-Western other.

The elaborations on why various outgroups, most notably non-white immigrants, black people, and Muslims, constitute a threat to both Western societies (them vs. them) and China (them vs. us) range from overtly racist speech to ostensibly objective reports on their detrimental impact on social order, the economy, and the 'ordinary people'. These often include highlighting the link between outgroups and crimes, claiming that they are treated favourably (by the 'white left') and having an 'unjustified sense of entitlement' (Krämer, 2017), and insisting that they are dependent on state welfare funded by the 'ordinary people'. Internet users again use neologisms such as *heilü* (blacks and Muslims) and *heimolü* (blacks, Mexicans, and Muslims) to establish an equivalence between outgroups, and present these enormously diverse racial, ethnic and religious groups as a collective whole that is lazy, welfare-dependent, prone to crime, and self-entitled. Europe in the refugee crisis, then, is projected as seeding its own destruction for accepting non-white immigrants and Muslims.

¹² *Shengmu* literally translates as the holy mother. It is a derogatory term supposed to mean a sanctimonious person (usually female) or a 'virtual signaler'. *Shengmu* has been used to label politicians such as Angela Merkel and ordinary female citizens displaying sympathies towards socially disadvantaged groups.

¹³ See Kimmel (2018) for the role of masculinity in the mobilisation of radical right groups in Germany, Sweden, and the US.



The 'Other'	The Chinese Self-image	Typical arguments	Ideological features
Immigrants and refugees; Muslims; Black people; US Latinos (the non-Western other)	The Chinese people (both nationals of the PRC and diasporas) as hardworking and high-achieving; the Chinese nation as homogeneous	Blacks and Muslims are lazy, crime prone, self-entitled and enjoy preferential treatment.	Racism; xenophobia; nativism; Islamophobia
The Western 'liberal elites' (the Western other)	Chinese people (nationals of PRC) as pragmatic, realistic, more aware of the danger of ideologies, and rightly focused on economic growth and social stability	Liberal elites are either ignorant or deceptive. Progressive or postmaterialist values are destructive and leading the West to its own decline/destruction.	Authoritarianism; anti-elitism; realism; pragmatism; social Darwinism; market liberalism
The 'Western world' in general	China as a rising power but marginalised in the normative hierarchy of the liberal order	Western criticisms of China are biased. Western imperialism is the root cause of most problems in the world.	Anti-hegemonic nationalism

Table 1 Dimensions of self/other relations in online discussions

When it comes to how these outgroups might pose a threat to the Chinese self, the question is addressed differently in relation to Chinese diasporas and the Chinese nation-state. As the threads scrutinised here are clearly focused on diagnosing 'Western' problems, many postings are concerned with the tension between Chinese diasporas and other ethnic minorities in the West (especially the US), and some contributors present themselves as overseas students or immigrants. The narrative of diasporic Chineseness depicts transnational Chinese communities as diligent, highly-motivated and high-achieving, but are oppressed by the white majority, who are described in several posts as 'sitting at the top of the food chain', and other minorities. A complex sense of inferiority (to the white majority) regarding social status and superiority (over other minorities) regarding essentialised traits and characters of ethnicities is pervasive in this discourse. On the one hand, the representation of Chinese diasporas subscribes to the mainstream 'discursive distinction between "good" (i.e. hard-working) and "bad" (i.e. free-loading) immigrants'; and align the transnational Chinese ethnic identity with the 'good' immigrant, which is an integrating strategy commonly used by other immigrant minorities¹⁴ (Jackson and

¹⁴ In the American context, Asian Americans are especially influenced, and sometimes negatively, by the 'model minority' narrative (Kawai 2006).



Bauder, 2013). On the other hand, the experiences of structural discrimination in a white majority society are interpreted through social Darwinist analyses of ruthless competitions between races for power and survival that appeal blatantly to biological racism.

Who would be a threat to the white left ruling class? Obviously, it's not the *heilü* [blacks and Muslims]. First of all, they don't have the intelligence. Secondly social welfare would destroy the only bit of motivation to succeed they have. Only white people and the Chinese, with high IQ and high motivation to succeed, can pose a threat to their status. That's why they treat blacks and Muslims favourably and discriminate against whites and the Chinese. (Q3, #112770537, 23-7-2016)

Within the country [the US], the white left collaborate with the *heimolü* [blacks, Mexicans, and Muslims] to oppress Chinese people. Internationally they're ideologically driven and always against China brainlessly. ... If one day the Chinese in America are sent into the gas chamber, then the one who presses the execution button must be the white left and their black alliance, not those they call racist. (Q2, #94770509, 11-4-2016)

In the context of discussing domestic issues, conservative netizens cite misinformed statistics, personal anecdotes, and political upheavals in Europe and the US as dire warnings against accepting any refugees or 'appeasing' Chinese Muslims, and a supporting evidence for maintaining ethno-cultural homogeneity. While some feel relieved that China is relatively safe from the 'dangers' of immigration and ethno-cultural diversity, others claim that the country is currently facing similar challenges, namely the 'problems' of African immigrants in Guangzhou, whose number is hugely exaggerated¹⁵, and Chinese Muslims. As mentioned earlier, anti-black racism has been epidemic in Chinese cyberspace (Li, 2017). Racist nationalists portray African immigrants as a threat not only to social order, but also to the 'purity' of the ethnic lineage of the Chinese nation. Muslims on the other hand are framed more as an existential threat to the Chinese nation the same way they are to Western civilisation¹⁶. Although there had always been a discernible Han supremacism online (Leibold, 2010), it had not been targeted specifically at Muslim minority groups before the globally circulating Islamophobic discourse on 'Islamisation' gained momentum on Chinese internet. Recent incidents of terrorist attacks linked to separatism in Xinjiang have also fuelled Islamophobia online, and have been invoked as attesting to the violent, backward and barbaric nature of the religion.

¹⁵ The number is cited as 300,000 or 500,000. According to the city, there were 16,000 Africans residing in Guangzhou in 2014, and only 10,344 in 2017. The urban population of Guangzhou is above 10 million.

¹⁶ One user writes: 'If the "white right" take power, there is about 10% probability that they'll annihilate China, since they're more interested in the purification of their own land. But if the white left take power, they'll surely be defeated by Muslims and the Chinese are 90% likely to be annihilated (the Hui people will kill the last one of the Han people), unless we convert to Islam'. (Q3, #102137827, 23-5-2016)



The white left have turned the beautiful and affluent Sweden into a notorious 'rape capital'...I feel so lucky that I am Han Chinese (*hanzu*): our nation can never be assimilated by the inferior culture of extreme Islam, past, present, or future. The white left and feminists who defend extreme Islam are double-standard bitches. They're either stupid or evil. (Q3, #279136207, 19-12-2017)

The distinction between civilisation and barbarism, which generally views the Han as civilised and culturally superior, was a categorical one in the Sino-centric worldview of imperial China (Phillips, 2018). However, it was not until the late 19th century when ideas of race and racial hierarchies were introduced to China by intellectuals seeking reforms and modernisation. As Dikötter (2015) has shown, a particular mode of racial thinking, according to which mankind is divided into distinct, hierarchically organised, biological groups, has profoundly influenced social and political thought in modern China throughout the 20th century. From the very beginning, Chinese intellectuals' translation and interpretation of Western scholarship at the turn of the century tied theories of race with an evolutionary understanding of human history as struggles between different races, as exemplified by Yan Fu's famous (mis)translation of T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*. Translating the doctrine of survival of the fittest in biological evolution as 'the superior win, the inferior lose' (*youshenglietan*), Yan's evolutionist analysis of human society was widely celebrated at the time, when China was faced with unprecedented challenges from Western imperial powers. The category of race and the notion of racial struggles were appropriated not only to make sense of the international system China had been forced to engage with, but also to construct the concept of a Chinese nation (*zhonghuaminzu*) as an 'organic entity with an uninterrupted line of descent' (Dikötter, 2015). Under the influence of prominent intellectuals and political leaders such as Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen (Zhang, 2014), the idea that the Chinese belong to a biological group called the 'yellow race', and that the white and yellow races are superior to others in terms of intelligence and cultural traits was instrumental in the formation of national consciousness¹⁷.

While racism is formally denied under communist rule, racial thinking continues to underpin various 'myths of descent' in official and popular imaginations of Chinese ethnic identity (Sautman, 1997). Furthermore, the Soviet Union inspired approach to governing ethnic minorities has not been free from hierarchisation and paternalism despite official criticisms of Han chauvinism (Law, 2012). Racism and Han supremacism entails parallel structures of racialisation that essentialise differences and look down on certain ethno-racial groups as inferior or backwards. In this light, the online discourse on the racial superiority of whites and the Chinese as well as on the struggle between races clearly mirrors prevailing racial theories in the early 20th century; and

¹⁷ See Leibold (2006) on the tension between the 'racial formulation' of national consciousness and a more 'subjective formulation' in Republican China.



has its roots in the long-standing racial nationalism inseparable from the formation of Chinese national identity. On the other hand, this racial nationalism has been refashioned by adopting and expanding on the arguments and perspectives of xenophobic populism in contemporary Western societies. Although the emphasis varies in imagining ethnic identity in diaspora and domestic contexts, in both cases the reproduction of the diligent, intelligent and unified Chinese self involves ascribing inferiority and barbarism to both external (non-white immigrants) and internal others (Muslim minorities).

5.2 The declining Other and political identity

The white left are presumptuous victors who believe in welfarism, unconditional religious freedom and the end of history. Their main inclination at the moment is extreme liberalism and egalitarianism. ...In other words, the white left are the corrupt ruling class in the capitalist world. Their extreme liberalism sends out a smell of being over-civilised to the degree that it begins to rot. They'll collapse from within sooner or later. (Q3, #116846381, 14-8-2016)

If the predication of the non-Western Other is straightforwardly negative and focused on polarising racial or religious traits, then the ways in which the Western other is characterised are much more nuanced and multifaceted. Research on Chinese nationalism has explicated the significance of Western (and Japanese) imperialism and collective memories of 'national humiliation' for the evolution of Chinese national identity (Gries, 2004; Callahan 2012). While cyber-nationalism has typically been exacerbated by conflicts in traditional security areas such as territorial disputes and the status of Taiwan, Chinese criticisms of Western 'liberal elites' shift focus away from security dilemmas to normative principles, generating a pro-capitalist, anti-democratic, and post-revolutionary narrative about China's political identity against a declining Other trapped by its own achievements.

The conviction that liberal democracy is self-destructive due to the rise of postmaterialist values and an appreciation of the doctrines of economic growth and technological advancement in capitalist modernity are intertwined in the dual-faced evaluation of the Western other. Based on their scrutiny of various crises in Western societies, informed discussants identify the superiority of the Chinese self no longer in the ancient glories of the Chinese civilisation, as cultural conservatives would do, but instead within the allegedly pragmatic, rational, and non-moralising approach to economic growth and social stability taken by the current authoritarian regime. While some explain this pragmatism and resistance to 'left ideologies' by invoking the traumatising experience of the Cultural Revolution (and compare the 'white left' to Mao's red guards), others attribute Chinese pragmatism to a timeless construal of history in which the Chinese nation has always been more 'politically savvy' than Westerners. In this de-historicised notion of political Chineseness, the Confucian moral principles valued by cultural nationalists are dismissed as a kind of 'political



correctness' and replaced with a demoralised and ahistorical account of power struggles that seem completely unchanged from the succession of dynasties to factional competitions within the Communist Party.

We have thousands of years of political history. Longevity is a wisdom. For thousands of years we have seen so many lying politicians, traitors, and bloody factional struggles. So we're particularly sensitive to this kind of business. (Q1, #125457607, 7-10-2016)

I think most Chinese people are better than the 'white left' because we are sober. We understand that ...reality is more important than ideals; labour creates wealth; war destroys wealth; real interests before anything else; evils should never be tolerated; order is of utmost importance. (Q1, #383348716, 4-5-2018)

Citing Deng Xiaoping's famous maxim 'development is the hard truth' and his cat metaphor repeatedly, commentators contrast the pragmatism of 'Chinese people' as a timeless and abstract category who 'have seen everything' and are most aware of the stakes of Realpolitik with the idealism and moralism of Western 'liberal elites'. The ostensibly anti-ideological preference for pragmatism is entangled with more explicit forms of extreme right discourses (e.g. racism) on one hand and tied down to justifications of the authoritarian status quo on the other. At the core of the political discourse is a realist authoritarianism that rejects postmaterialist values such as human rights, feminism, minority rights, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism not primarily in defense of traditional values, but on the ground that they are unrealistic and/or damaging for economic growth and social stability. This general identification with the official policy line should not be reduced to merely the result of top-down propaganda. It is better understood as partly driven by popular structures of feeling (Callahan 2012) that merge senses of national pride with political legitimacy, engendering a cognitive process Chih-Yu Shih calls self-Sinicisation, which prompts one to analyse 'an incident from an imagined national perspective, usually advanced by the Chinese Communist Party' (2013: 81).

Furthermore, the perception of global shifts in economic and military power feeds into the support for the party-state's regime legitimacy and deepens the disenchantment with ideals of liberal democracy that used to seem appealing to Chinese elites. The argument is twofold. First, netizens articulate one version of Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism that links the acceptance of postmaterialist values with stages of economic development. They accordingly argue that China's sober pragmatism comes from the fact that the country has a developing economy and citizens are more preoccupied with problems of survival, whereas Western societies have lost their grasp of reality after prolonged periods of peace and prosperity. Secondly, it is then inferred that China has a growing international influence precisely because of its concentration on development instead of ideologies, while Western societies are falling apart because long-term prosperity has led to the rise of arrogant 'white left' holding (and preaching) calamitous liberal values. A number of postings are from overseas students and recent emigrants who have experienced first-hand what they



consider to be weaknesses of liberal democracies, such as the 'tyranny of political correctness', reverse racism, (illegal) immigration, the welfare state (high taxes), and overly lenient justice systems.

When you talk with American liberals you have an odd feeling of disjuncture. This is a group that's no longer doing any better than us [Chinese], waning, about to be left behind by the wheels of history. But they're still looking at you so condescendingly. (Q1, #129901238, 5-11-2016)

Because Chinese people is the most realistic nation. ... The Western world has long been advocating for freedom and democracy. When we were weak and humiliated, we rushed to worshipping these ideas. But now the Western world is over. Society is torn apart by its own ideas, like worn-out clothes. We of course won't continue to wear these worn-out clothes. (Q1, #170742068, 17-5-2017)

However, although discussants generally picture the 'Western world' at the current conjuncture as decadent and politically naïve, they are, concurring with the radical right in the West, appreciative of the aggressive, masculine and competitive spirits of capitalist modernity along with its material achievements. This is consistent with the logics of Social Darwinism and Realpolitik that permeate the analytical frameworks of most topics ranging from racial relations and international relations to economic policies. It is held that only strong, self-reliant nations, individuals and races could gain themselves respect, and that 'competition is perpetual and mainstream' (Q2, #228334665). In this simultaneously individualistic and collectivist paradigm, national survival and security must take precedence over personal freedom, yet projects of redistributive social justice are considered disadvantageous for hard-working individuals as the existence of social structures is denied. Submitting to the law of the jungle, some even shed positive lights on Western imperialism and colonialism of the 19th century and contrast them with the 'toothless' liberalism of the present.

America wouldn't have today's powers without the Westward Movement, Southern plantations, and the blood and tears of workers in the process of industrialisation. All civilisations are built on oppressions, exploitations, killings and blood. WASP need not to apologise to native Americans and blacks. The Arabs need not to apologise to the Persians. The Germans need not to apologise to the Romans. (Q2, #96397775, 22-4-2016)

Civilisations can never survive on compromise and weak will. Compared to the West a century ago, the Western world today is ill. (Q4, #76415692, 13-5-2016)

Lastly, while Chinese domestic issues do not occupy a central place in the threads examined here, a few postings warn that a growing number of elite youngsters in the more developed regions of the country are becoming the 'yellow left', or becoming identified with liberal values and engaged in, for instance, environmental or feminist activisms. Conservative netizens claim that these youngsters are similarly out of touch with the reality and overflowed with sympathy. In fact, the label 'white left' has travelled



from online debates about Western politics to those on domestic problems, being used to stigmatise the already highly oppressed social movements. Ultimately, the normative identity of the Chinese regime performed in the discourse of realist authoritarianism is one that eliminates dissenting voices and delegitimises efforts to pursue social changes as detrimental to the paramount imperatives of economic growth and political stability. Although differing to a certain degree from the official narratives of the party-state on subjects such as environmental protection and social inequality, the discourse exhibits a grassroots consensus among certain members of the urban elite on the hybrid authoritarian-neoliberal hegemony in post-socialist China.

5.3 Global imaginary and the rise and fall of civilisations

The Chinese antipathy toward the Western 'liberal elites' is not only grounded on a reaffirmation of racial nationalism and authoritarianism, but also entangled with a revolt against the normative hierarchies of the liberal world order. Casual observers unfamiliar with the political spectrum in Western politics explain their detestation of the 'white left' by stating that these are the same ones trying to impose 'so-called universal values' on China and other non-Western countries. Netizens not only express their irritations with the West's 'ideologically-driven' biases against China, but also argue that the refugee crisis itself is one of the ramifications of Western interference in the rest of the world. This interpretation is also shared by mainstream media. For instance, an opinion piece on *Beijing Youth Daily* (Cheng, 2015), the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League Committee in Beijing, contends that the European refugee crisis exemplifies how the West's arrogant project of exporting 'universal values' harms world peace.

Governmental and academic discourses have sought to resist the marginalisation of China in the liberal order by drawing on elements of traditional Chinese philosophy and identifying the Chinese state 'as a principled, moral actor' with the aim of building a 'harmonious world' (Suzuki, 2007; Schneider, 2014). Such an approach, however, is barely present in popular geopolitical discourses in the cyberspace. Through the example of military forums, Zhou (2005) has shown that informed netizens, equipped with an 'interest-driven game-playing paradigm to interpret' world politics (2005: 548), take a strictly realist and state-centric approach to analysing national policies and international power relations. As noted earlier, the debates examined here presuppose a similar paradigm and extend it to explaining the power games between races and civilisation. In the apparent resistance to the Euro-American normative hegemony, digital citizens reinscribe Eurocentric concepts of race, modernity and development, and reinforce the realist hegemony in producing the knowledge of international relations. The idea of 'world harmony' (*shijie datong*) is in fact mocked as one of the unrealistic, laughable ideologies of the 'white left'. Furthermore, the global imaginary yields a series of essentialist civilisational analyses, which treat



civilisations as discrete, autonomous and objective entities without acknowledging their internal pluralities and the constitutive role of global interconnections.

In a recurrent metaphor, the 'white left' or liberal values are said to be an autoimmune disease of the Western civilisation, which is going down the road towards self-destruction for admitting and tolerating the different, or rather, the barbarian or the 'backwards'. Although discussants do not specifically define what the Western civilisation means, the underlying definition coincides with the rhetoric of white supremacy and is essentially racial and religious, as the slang term for its quintessential enemy – the '*heilü*' – indicates. The narrative envisages not only a fundamental clash between Western and Islamic civilisations as 'civilisation in the plural', but also an existential threat to civilisation 'in the singular' (Bettiza, 2014) posed by an abstract notion of barbarism. This resonates in a sense with Trump's Warsaw speech in July 2017, in which the American president calls for defending 'the West' as 'every last inch of civilisation'¹⁸. Chinese observers also frequently make historical analogies between this scenario and the fall of the Roman Empire under barbarian attacks as well as the Uprising of the Five barbarians (*wuhu luanhua*) in Chinese history. The Chinese civilisation, then, is imagined not as a threat but rather an equal to 'the West', both belonging to the class of the civilised as opposed to the barbarian.

Agnew perceptively points out that Chinese elites envisage China's rise through a 'a contradictory amalgam of Western-style nationalism and a traditional totalistic conception of world order' (2010: 570). The online discourse scrutinised here internalises not only 'Western-style' nationalism, but also Eurocentric assumptions about progress and hierarchy. However, although there is no space here to explore this in detail, it is notable that the cyclic or circular vision of human history characteristic of the traditional Chinese worldview is also reflected in this civilisational imaginary: history repeats itself; and civilisations rise and fall constantly. As the numerous historical references and analogies suggest, nationalist netizens identify with the official narrative of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' in part as a concrete goal of modernisation understood as linear progress, yet also partly as a somewhat natural development within a non-teleological conception of world history as in continuous flux.

¹⁸ In a hugely popular essay on Trump's planned 'Muslim travel ban' posted in May 2016 that has gathered more than 25,000 upvotes (Q4, #76415692), the contributor recounts the demises of ancient civilisations and concludes that a civilisation is destined to fall if it 'loses the will and courage to defend itself'. The American president would make a similar statement a year later in his speech in Poland.



6. CONCLUSION: ON ANTI-WESTERN EUROCENTRISM AND ANTI-HEGEMONIC HEGEMONIES

This article has investigated emergent right-wing discourses on Chinese internet that combine the vocabulary and arguments of right-wing populism in Western politics with pre-existing expressions of cyber-nationalism, cyber-racism and Han supremacism. Through qualitative analysis of around one thousand postings discussing the European refugee crisis, the American presidency, and Western 'liberal elites' retrieved from a popular social media website, this research details the changing ways in which informed internet users in China adopt the style of right-wing populism to reconstruct self/other relations and produce popular narratives of global order. Instead of populism as such, the core ideological features of the anti-*baizuo* discourse can be theorised as racial nationalism and realist authoritarianism. By naming, analysing, and denouncing the 'white left', conservative netizens reiterate the superiority and homogeneity of China's ethno-racial identity against a threatening, non-Western other, and articulate China's political identity against a declining Western other.

While the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe and the US have been linked to popular revolts against economic globalisation, the hostility towards liberal values on Chinese social media is associated with anti-imperialist sentiments and the popular resentment against the normative hierarchy of the liberal order. However, this popular geopolitical discourse consolidates both external and internal hegemonies in the very process of challenging the Euro-American hegemony. On the one hand, it perpetuates Eurocentric notions of race, nation, and modernisation, limiting the possibilities of development to 'a particular vision of Western modernity' (Barabantseva, 2012) modelled on aggressive capitalism and racialised nativism. On the other hand, it also reinforces the 'internal hegemony by suppressing differences within the nation' (Dirlik, 1996: 114), both in terms of alternative political imaginations and expressions of heterogeneous ethno-cultural identities.

Although some of the more extreme right aspects of the online discourse, such as those on racism, social Darwinism and market fundamentalism, diverge from the official ideology and policies, it generally upholds the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime and shares a prudent optimism on China's rise with the ruling party. As these pro-globalisation urban elites are against the underpinning *values* of the liberal world order but not its *rules*, especially those regarding economic cooperation and governance, they are likely to concur with IR scholars who predict that China as a rising power is pursuing an 'open economic order' and a more 'equal' or pluralist political order without seeking to challenge the liberal order as rule-based frameworks of global governance (Wu, 2018; Breslin, 2018).

However, the logics of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies have more implications for China's domestic politics than for the multilateral institutions



and processes of global governance. They have enabled both internet users and the party-state to mobilise the popular hostility against Western hegemony and perceptions of geopolitical rivalry for the purpose of invalidating dissenting perspectives on the country's political regime, economic system, and social inequalities. As conservative netizens apply their condemnation of the 'white left' to criticising, for example, feminist movements within China, the Chinese government has been deploying the rhetoric of 'the instigation of foreign powers' to frame domestic activisms as instances of Western interference. If this strategy of internalising the international and externalising the domestic can be considered as a form of non-Western agency, it is one that perpetuates and politicises the dichotomy of China versus the West, which itself is part of the hegemonic conception of world order continuously performed into being by foreign policy discourses and IR scholarship. Coming to terms with the perils of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies may start with acknowledging the paradoxes, hierarchies, and inconsistencies of the liberal project on national and international levels. It invites us to view 'Western' populism and 'Eastern' authoritarianism not as neatly separated but as built on co-constitutive knowledges and epistemologies produced in interconnected histories and presents.

REFERENCES

- Agnew J (2010) Emerging China and Critical Geopolitics: Between World Politics and Chinese Particularity. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 51(5): 569–582.
- Altemeyer B (1988) *Enemies of freedom: Understanding right-wing authoritarianism*. San Francisco; London: Jossey-Bass.
- Barabantseva E (2012) In pursuit of an alternative model? the modernisation trap in China's official development discourse. *East Asia* 29(1): 63–79.
- Baumgarten N (2017) Othering Practice in a Right-Wing Extremist Online Forum. *Language@Internet* 14: 1–18.
- Bettiza G (2014) Civilizational analysis in international relations: Mapping the field and advancing a 'civilizational politics' line of research. *International Studies Review* 16(1): 1–28.
- Bray D and Jeffreys E (eds) (2016) *New mentalities of government in China*. London: Routledge.
- Breslin S (2018) Global Reordering and China's Rise: Adoption, Adaptation and Reform. *International Spectator* 53(1): 57–75
- Brubaker R (2017) Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(8): 1191–1226.
- Bruter M and Harrison S (2011) *Mapping extreme right ideology: an empirical geography of the European extreme right*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Brym R (2016) After postmaterialism: An essay on China, Russia and the United States. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 41(2): 195–212.
- Caiani M and Della Porta D (2011) The elitist populism of the extreme right: A frame analysis of extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany. *Acta Politica* 46(2): 180–202.

- 
- Caiani M and Kröll P (2015) The transnationalization of the extreme right and the use of the Internet. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 39(4): 331–351.
- Cairns C and Carlson A (2016) Real-world Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis. *China Quarterly* 225: 23–49.
- Callahan WA (2009) The Cartography of National Humiliation and the Emergence of China's Geobody. *Public Culture* 21(1): 141–173.
- Callahan WA (2012) *China: The pessoptimist nation*. Oxford University Press.
- Canovan M (1999) Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* 47(1): 2–16.
- Carlson B (2018) Why China loves Trump. *The Atlantic*, March Issue. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/03/trump-china/550886/>
- Cheng Y (2011) From campus racism to cyber racism: Discourse of race and Chinese nationalism. *China Quarterly* 207: 561–579.
- Dikötter F (2015) *The discourse of race in modern China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dirlik A (1996) Reversals, ironies, hegemonies: notes on the contemporary historiography of modern China. *Modern China* 22(3): 243–284.
- Duara P (2008) History and globalization in China's long twentieth century. *Modern China* 34(1): 152–164.
- Elchardus M and Spruyt B (2016) Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology. *Government and Opposition* 51(01): 111–133.
- Feldman S (2003) Enforcing Social Conformity: A Theory of Authoritarianism. *Political Psychology* 24(1): 41–74.
- Fraser N (2016) Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism: A Choice that Feminists Should Refuse. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 24(4): 281–284.
- Frazier RT and Zhang L (2014) Ethnic identity and racial contestation in cyberspace: Deconstructing the Chineseness of Lou Jing. *China Information* 28(2): 237–258.
- Goodwin M and Milazzo C (2017) Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19(3): 450–464.
- Gries PH (2004) *China's new nationalism: Pride, politics, and diplomacy*. University of California Press.
- Gusterson H (2017) From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the rise of nationalist populism. *American Ethnologist* 44(2): 209–214.
- Hall H (1985) Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al. *New Left Review* 1 (151): 115–124.
- Han R (2018) *Contesting cyberspace in China: Online expression and authoritarian resilience*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hernández JC and Zhang I (2017) 'Uncle Trump' Finds Fans in China. *The New York Times*. 9 November. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/world/asia/trump-china-fans.html>
- Hobson JM and Sajed A (2017) Navigating Beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory: Exploring the Complex Landscapes of Non-Western Agency. *International Studies Review* 19(4): 547–572.

- 
- Hooghe M and Dassonneville R (2018) Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments. *PS - Political Science and Politics* (July): 1–7.
- Horsti K (2017) Digital Islamophobia: The Swedish woman as a figure of pure and dangerous whiteness. *New Media and Society* 19(9): 1440–1457.
- Hughes CR (2000) Nationalism in Chinese cyberspace. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 13(2): 195–209.
- Inglehart R (2007) Postmaterialist Values and the Shift from Survival to Self-Expression Values. In: Dalton RJ and Klingemann H-D (eds) *Oxford handbook of political behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 223–239.
- Inglehart R and Norris P (2017) Trump and the populist authoritarian parties: the silent revolution in reverse. *Perspectives on Politics* 15(2): 443–454.
- Ivarsflaten E (2007) What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe?: Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases. *Comparative Political Studies* 41(1): 3–23.
- Jackson S and Bauder H (2013) Neither Temporary, Nor Permanent: The Precarious Employment Experiences of Refugee Claimants in Canada. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27(3): 360–381.
- Kawai Y (2005) Stereotyping Asian Americans: The dialectic of the model minority and the yellow peril. *Howard Journal of Communications* 16(2): 109–130.
- Kimmel MS (2018) *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into - and Out Of - violent Extremism*. University of California Press.
- Krämer B (2017) Populist online practices: the function of the Internet in right-wing populism. *Information Communication and Society* 20(9): 1293–1309.
- Krzyżanowski M (2010) *The discursive construction of European identities*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Krzyżanowski M (2018) 'We Are a Small Country That Has Done Enormously Lot': The 'Refugee Crisis' and the Hybrid Discourse of Politicizing Immigration in Sweden. *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 16(1-2). 97–117.
- Law I (2012) *Red racisms: racism in communist and post-communist contexts*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leibold J (2006) Competing narratives of racial unity in Republican China: From the yellow emperor to peking man. *Modern China* 32(2): 181–220.
- Leibold J (2010) More than a category: Han supremacism on the Chinese internet. *China Quarterly* (203): 539–559.
- Leibold J (2016) Han cybernationalism and state territorialization in the People's Republic of China. *China Information* 30(1): 3–28.
- Li R (2018) 97% of Chinese would reject receiving refugees: online poll. Global Times, 20 June. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1107731.shtml>
- Li S (2017) *Mediatized China-Africa Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- MacWilliams MC (2016) Who Decides When The Party Doesn't? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49(04): 716–721.
- Moffitt B (2017) *Global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mudde C (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mutz DC (2018) Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(19): E4330–E4339.
- Patton MQ (2002) *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

- 
- Pelinka A (2013) Right Wing Populism: Concept and Typology. In: Wodak R, Mral B, and Khosravi-Nik M (eds) *Right-Wing Populism in Europe Politics and Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 3–22.
- Pfafman TM, Carpenter CJ and Tang Y (2015) The Politics of Racism: Constructions of African Immigrants in China on ChinaSMACK. *Communication, Culture and Critique* 8(4): 540–556.
- Phillips A (2018) Contesting the Confucian peace: Civilization, barbarism and international hierarchy in East Asia. *European Journal of International Relations* 24(4): 740–764.
- Rauchfleisch A and Schäfer MS (2015) Multiple public spheres of Weibo: a typology of forms and potentials of online public spheres in China. *Information Communication and Society* 18(2): 139–155.
- Reisigl M (2017) The discourse-historic approach. In: Flowerdew J and E. RJ (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 44–59.
- Reisigl M and Wodak R (2009) The Discourse-Historical Approach. In Wodak R and Meyer M (eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage, pp. 87–121.
- Robinson N and Milne S (2017) Populism and political development in hybrid regimes: Russia and the development of official populism. *International Political Science Review* 38(4): 412–425.
- Salazar PJ (2018) The Alt-Right as a Community of Discourse. *Javnost* 25(1–2): 135–143.
- Sautman BV (1997) Myths of descent, racial nationalism and ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China. In Dikötter F (eds) *The construction of racial identities in China and Japan*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 75–95.
- Schneider F (2014) Reconceptualising world order: Chinese political thought and its challenge to International Relations theory. *Review of International Studies* 40(4): 683–703.
- Shen S and Breslin S (eds) (2010) *Online Chinese nationalism and China's bilateral relations*. Challenges Facing Chinese Political Development. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Shih, CY (2013) *Sinicizing international relations: Self, civilization, and intellectual politics in Subaltern East Asia*. Springer.
- Sigley G (2006) Chinese governmentalities: Government, governance and the socialist market economy. *Economy and Society* 35(4): 487–508.
- Stavrakakis Y, Katsambekis G, Nikisianis N, et al. (2017) Extreme right-wing populism in Europe: revisiting a reified association. *Critical Discourse Studies* 14(4): 420–439.
- Suzuki S (2007) The importance of 'Othering' in China's national identity: Sino-Japanese relations as a stage of identity conflicts. *Pacific Review* 20(1): 23–47.
- Tang W (2016) *Populist authoritarianism: Chinese political culture and regime sustainability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wang H 汪晖 (2007) [The politics of depoliticisation, the multiple construction of hegemony and the vanishing 1960s] 去政治化的政治、霸权的多重构成与 60 年代的消逝. *Open Times 开放时代*. 2:5–41.
- Weyland K (1999) Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. *Comparative Politics* 31(4): 379.
- Weyland K (2003) Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: How much affinity? *Third World Quarterly* 24(6): 1095–1115.
- Wodak R (2015) *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. London: Sage.

- 
- Wu X (2018) China in search of a liberal partnership international order. *International Affairs* 94(5): 995-1018.
- Yang G (2014) Political contestation in Chinese digital spaces: Deepening the critical inquiry. *China Information* 28(2): 135–144.
- Zhang C (2014) Situated interpretations of nationalism, imperialism, and cosmopolitanism: Revisiting the writings of Liang in the encounter between worlds. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 27(3): 343–360.
- Zhang C (2017) The curious rise of the 'white left' as a Chinese internet insult. *OpenDemocracy*, 11 May.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/digitaliberties/chenchen-zhang/curious-rise-of-white-left-as-chinese-internet-insult>
- Zhang C (2018) Governing neoliberal authoritarian citizenship: theorizing hukou and the changing mobility regime in China. *Citizenship Studies* 22(8): 855–881.
- Zhang L and Ong A (eds) (2008) *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*. Cornell University Press.
- Zhang TH, Brym R and Andersen R (2017) Liberalism and Postmaterialism in China: The Role of Social Class and Inequality. *Chinese Sociological Review* 49(1): 65–87.
- Zhang Y (2016) China and liberal hierarchies in global international society: power and negotiation for normative change. *International Affairs* 92(4): 795–816.
- Zhao Y (2008) *Communication in China: Political economy, power, and conflict*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Zhou Y (2005) Informed nationalism: Military websites in Chinese cyberspace. *Journal of Contemporary China* 14(44): 543–562.

APPENDIX I

ID	Question and link	No. of answers as of 19-06-2018	No. of Comments as of 19-06-2018	No. of views as of 18-09-2018
Q1	为什么很多中国人鄙视受过高等教育的西方「白左」？ Why do many Chinese people despise the well-educated 'white left' in the West? https://www.zhihu.com/question/51331837	730	7523	5,222,926
Q2	是不是很多中国人不喜欢白左？ Is it true that many Chinese dislike the white left? https://www.zhihu.com/question/42472419	267	2982	894,309
Q3	如何看待白左？ How to view the white left? https://www.zhihu.com/question/21459364	193	1239	619,659
Q4	为什么唐纳德·特朗普说中国人坏话没有激怒美国人，说穆斯林却激怒了？ Why were Americans not irritated when Donald Trump said bad things about the Chinese, but they were enraged when he spoke badly of Muslims? https://www.zhihu.com/question/38426001	N/A	N/A	2,098,140