


REVIEW ESSAY

# The Incurious Approach to East Asian Populism: Why Studies on Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are Often Overlooked in Political Science

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## Abstract

The East Asian democracies (EAD) of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have received little attention from the international political science community working on populism. By analyzing the last two to three decades of research on EAD we look for clues to help us explain why there is so little interest. In our review we encounter cases of eclectic conceptualization, suboptimal data, innovative categorization, binary analytics, and even political bias, all of which may weaken the persuasiveness of the respective research in the eyes of critical colleagues. Our key finding, however, is that all studies on EAD implicitly refer to local political standards as the baseline from which alleged populist behavior is identified and labeled. In direct comparison, the populist characteristics of East Asian politicians appear to be less pronounced than those of sledgehammer populists like Donald Trump, Hugo Chavez, or Boris Johnson. Consequently, scholars working on the latter may be less curious about the former. Our findings, therefore, confront us with the question of what to use as a baseline for the measurement of potentially populist phenomena. We argue for the application of what is locally considered standard political behavior and conclude that such a practice has the potential to draw more attention to cases from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

**Keywords:** populism; Japan; South Korea; Taiwan; East Asia; democracy; antagonism; communication; leadership

## Introduction

East Asia is a world region that has received little attention from the international political science community working on populism.<sup>1</sup> Well received edited volumes are evidence of this. The *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (De la Torre 2020) features one chapter on all of Asia. In it, the three liberal democracies in East Asia (hereafter EAD) Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are mentioned only in passing. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017) contains one chapter on East Asia (North and

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South), with the countries of the region taking up 18 pages, or 2.6 percent of the entire book (Hellmann 2017). The volume *The Ideational Approach to Populism* (Hawkins, et al. 2019) does not mention East Asia at all. The two recent volumes focusing explicitly on the region—*Populism in Asian Democracies* (Lee, Wu, and Bandyopadhyay 2021) and the *Routledge Handbook of Populism in the Asia Pacific* (Subedi et al., 2023)—are welcome additions to the literature, since they shed light on vast under-researched regions. However, political science has not yet produced a comprehensive volume that goes the extra mile of including and systematically comparing these world regions with the Americas and Europe. This seems especially true for the three liberal EAD.

Why is this? Is it because there is no East Asian populism to speak of? A number of scholars who have studied EAD disagree and we believe that their findings deserve more attention than they have received so far. After all, the number of liberal democracies is limited, and overlooking three of them seems like a missed opportunity to us. Most studies on EAD point at a small number of politicians who are categorized as populists (and all of whom won elections to public office). Political parties are hardly classified as populist except when they are headed by an alleged populist (who then seems to be the key reason for the party's populist label).

Hellmann (2017, 161) concludes his review of East Asian populism by stating that studies identifying populist actors in this world region “rarely rely on established definitions of populism.” We took his view as our lead to address the questions of how populism is defined in these studies and if the differences with dominant concepts are substantial enough to warrant the striking absence of EAD in most of the pertinent literature. These dominant concepts are based on the political-strategic, the socio-cultural, and the ideational approach. While there is notoriously no agreed-upon definition of populism, a majority of scholars seem to have settled on one of these three concepts.

The political-strategic approach to populism, as articulated by scholars such as Weyland (2001), emphasizes the role of political organizations, structures, and strategies as crucial and thus characteristic of popular mobilization. It focuses on populism in the context of political parties or social movements and assumes that charismatic leaders are key actors who exert influence over party organizations or within movements. In addition to charisma, the unmediated interaction between leader and followers is identified as crucial for populists to succeed in building organizational potential sufficient to mobilize support.

The socio-cultural approach (Ostiguy 2017) is based on assumptions about the cultural foundations of populism and emphasizes the performance skills of populists in mobilizing support. The basic contention is what defines a populist leader is that they often use symbols and narratives resonating with the cultural identity and values of their (potential) supporters, thus fostering a sense of collective identity and belonging. To this end, they use mostly unmediated communication, appealing to emotions such as anger, fear, and resentment through the deliberate use of emotional rhetoric and storytelling. This includes the rhetoric of an us-versus-them dichotomy, evoking feelings of nostalgia, and exploiting cultural resentments.

The ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2017; Müller 2016; Rummens 2017) focuses on the ideological aspects of populist movements and not only on their political-strategic or socio-cultural dimensions. For this reason, populism can adapt its ideological content to different contexts and issues. While certain core themes such as anti-elitism and appeals to “the people” remain constant, the specific content

of populist ideologies can vary depending on the socio-political context. In addition to charismatic leadership styles, appeals to emotions, and organizational resources, the key feature is that populism is understood as a set of ideas, beliefs, and discourses rather than simply a political strategy or organizational tactic. A key characteristic of populist leaders is that they often frame political issues in moral terms, dividing society into “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (anti-elitism, anti-establishment) to forge a Manichean dichotomy as a basis for mobilizing support. At their core, these narratives portray politics in simplistic, black-and-white terms, pitting the virtuous “us” against the corrupt “them.” A dominant strand of proponents of the ideational approach posits that populism is inherently antagonistic, anti-establishment, and anti-pluralist, and therefore cannot be a corrective to a defunct democracy but is almost always anti-democratic (Müller 2016; Rummens 2017).

We have used these three approaches as a field of reference when examining the literature on populist phenomena in the three EADs. During our foray into the literature, we found ten elements most often used to identify populism. Most of these ten elements can also be found within the three approaches discussed above, but the combinations and categories are broader, reflecting local adaptations and definitional innovations. Consequently, we organized the ten elements in four groups:

- I. Antagonism
  1. Us vs Them
  2. Popular sovereignty
- II. Communication
  3. *Direct* communication with voters
  4. Appeals to unorganized and non-partisan voters
  5. Theatrical and emotional communication style and performance
- III. Leadership
  6. “Charismatic” leader
  7. “Populist authoritarianism”
  8. Leader as “common man,” a leader of the people and outsider to the establishment
- IV. Policy
  9. “Mass-opportunism”
  10. Reforms

On the following pages we will explain in more detail which of the ten phenomena are assigned to those individual politicians most often referred to as East Asian populists. Simply put, we confirm Hellmann’s finding that many populist labels are not based on a thorough application of one of the dominant concepts. In addition, there seem to be few studies built on comprehensively collected data. Instead, almost all assignments rely on a varying amount of anecdotal evidence. This results in some populism labels needing adjectives as qualifiers and consequently not convincing those who require a complete congruence with any of the dominant concepts mentioned above.

Another relevant finding is the strong but unreflective tendency in the literature to judge phenomena against local political culture. This is a crucial and also obvious point (and not limited to studies on EAD): the threshold at which rhetoric turns populist is usually neither addressed nor reflected in any of the publications we looked at for our review. The same is true for all other elements in our list. In addition, there we find a dominance of binary analytics, meaning that most studies pay less

attention to the shades of gray most populist qualities have. Given the vagueness of terms like elite, outsider, unorganized voters etc., our advice must be to take the quotations we cite from the literature with a grain of salt. In the absence of transparent measurement, data, and conceptual clarity, not every assignment of the populist label seems to come with the same persuasive power.

### Populism in EAD: What the Literature Tells Us

We have screened the body of literature on populism in EAD published in the last two to three decades in English and the local languages of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The following provides a brief overview over key populist actors identified in this literature and how their respective populist labels are justified by scholars.

#### Japan

Japan's post-war democracy has been characterized by a one-party dominant regime. Since its founding in 1955, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, *jiyū minshu tō*) has ruled the country for all but four years and over the decades upheld a strongly centralized system of government. The LDP's dominance is crucial to understand the cases of those three Japanese politicians who are most often discussed in populism studies: former prime minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, former Osaka governor and founder of the "Restoration Assembly" (*ishin no kai*) Hashimoto Tōru, and Tokyo governor Koike Yuriko, who founded the party "Tokyoites First Party" (*tomin fāsuto*, TFP) (cf. Yoshida 2024).

#### Antagonism

All three of them have been labeled populists for their confrontational, critical rhetoric and their "setting up of enemies" (Yoshida 2019). Koizumi called out explicitly those political groups opposing his reform plans to privatize the postal services, especially in his own party, the LDP (Matsutani 2022), and partly fueled his reform campaign with a narrative portraying them as opponents to progress in general (Asano 2009, 5). Lindgren (2015, 575) refers to Koizumi's attacks on established political structures and actors in Japan, and Hijino (2020, 244) adds "the bureaucracy, affiliated public sector companies, and politicians representing special interest groups that resisted deregulation and privatization" to the list of Koizumi's "villains."

Hashimoto's media attacks against labor unions, ministries, and journalists were submitted as evidence for his populist character by Hijino (2020, 246), while Yoshida (2019) makes this case by also alluding to Hashimoto's criticism of the central government and the LDP. In the case of Koike, antagonism was identified in the governor's criticism of her former party, the LDP (Hijino 2020, 250). Hieda, Zenkyo, and Nishikawa (2019, 5) conclude that "Koike had been consistently decrying ruling elites—especially those of the LDP in the assembly—for making all decisions behind closed doors and damaging the fairness and transparency of Tokyo's governance."

While the literature has little to say about Koizumi regularly using references to popular sovereignty, the two governors were portrayed differently. Weathers (2014) concluded: "In classic populist fashion, Hashimoto stresses the logic of majority rule, constantly insisting that he possesses a strong mandate from the voters." Hieda, Zenkyo, and Nishikawa (2019) quoted Koike's election platform as evidence of her

populist character: “Koike said that it is important to provide information and to make policy process more transparent because that would make government officials more accountable to the citizens of Tokyo, who are sovereign in governance.” They also pointed to the name of Koike’s party as evidence for her populist character: “Koike and the TFP presented the people as homogenous. They often addressed the ‘interest of Tokyoites,’ as their party name—Tokyoite First—indicates” (Hieda, Zenkyo, and Nishikawa 2019, 5).

### Communication

Asano (2009) was one of many academics and journalists who described Koizumi’s political communication as “theatrical.” Hijino (2020, 244) used the terms “forceful” and “blunt” for the former PM’s rhetoric. Clearly, Koizumi did not adhere to the same rhetorical code observed by most of his fellow Liberal Democrats. Hashimoto’s communication was also described as “theatrical” and “performative” (*gekijōgata popyurizumu*, “theatrical populism”; Arima 2017), and Weather (2014) identified “outstanding political performance skills,” “crowd-pleasing skills,” and “political theater.” Koike’s rhetoric and communication style were seldomly used as evidence of her populist character.

Since all three alleged populists also tried to mobilize voters outside the standard clientele organized within LDP support groups, the literature argued that communication with non-partisan voters happened in a direct way via TV and social media (Hijino 2020), something that Yakushiin (2017, 218) referred to as “telepopulism.”

### Leadership

Even though there are clear differences in degree, all three politicians were credited for their charisma as “strong leaders.” According to studies of Koizumi, this label was earned through his relentless reform efforts and his willingness to oust many Members of Parliament who opposed him. But both Koizumi and Hashimoto—the latter for his resolution to take (final) decisions on political issues—were also labelled “dictator” (Kobori 2013, 114).<sup>2</sup>

Another characteristic aligned with leadership was the role of outsider. Ōtake (2003) claimed Koizumi referred to himself as an “outsider,” or, as Yoshida (2024, 359) put it, “lone wolf,” in spite of being a third-generation politician with 30 years of experience as Member of Parliament and four assignments to cabinet positions. Koike looked back on a similar career within the political elite. She had risen within the ranks of the LDP, at one time even running for president of her party, but had left the LDP over a confrontation with parts of party leadership. Only Hashimoto, a former TV personality and lawyer, could claim to be an outsider without having this claim weakened by a career within the LDP.

For none of the three politicians does the literature report self-references as “(wo)man of the people” or mass events to appeal to voters, even though their popularity led to larger crowds at standard campaign appearances in front of train stations in major cities. However, political mass rallies are not part of Japan’s political culture anyway.

### Policy

“Mass opportunism” is the literal translation of the Japanese term used for populism (*taishū geigō shugi*). Arima (2021, 49) called it “irresponsible politics,” implying that

populism can be recognized by its capricious qualities. It is no wonder, then, that any popular policy pledges like tax reduction, higher child allowance, or lower tuition fees can activate “populism” as a fighting term (“*Kampfbegriff*,” as German sociologist Max Weber called it).

Next to “mass opportunism,” all three politicians heavily campaigned on reform pledges. Again, it was a consequence of the long-term dominance of the LDP that any politician opposed to the ever-ruling LDP would run campaigns on the promise to change things. Even many Liberal Democrats would use this promise to appeal to voters. As Yoshida (2024, 358) put it: “What makes Japan unique is that its populism is a mostly forgotten type, namely a reformist and neoliberal version, which arose in the shadow of the political hegemony of the LDP.” Hashimoto and Koizumi earned their reputations as neoliberal populists against this backdrop.

Hashimoto was also categorized as a nationalist populist. Mizushima (2016, 198–99) even compared him to Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. Other observers pointed at Hashimoto’s (alleged) nationalist statements and used those as justification for labeling his “Restoration Assembly” a right-wing populist party (Arima 2021), a debatable categorization not exclusive to studies on EAD (cf. Moffitt 2016, Klein and Kawasaki 2020).

### South Korea

Much of the relatively scarce literature on populism in South Korea is devoted to identifying politicians as populists without relying on a rigorous conceptualization of the term, but rather resorting to anecdotal evidence similar to the above case of Japan. Typically, liberal politicians such as former Presidents Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) and Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) as well as former Governor Lee Jae-myung (2018–2021) are described as “populists” or as employing “populistic strategies.”

### Antagonism

Scholars identify two “Others” when it comes to antagonism—the domestic and the international opponents. In terms of fomenting antagonism in the domestic realm, Roh is seen as a populist, because he has a “strong antipathy against ... the former establishment that maintains its privileges” and therefore “criticized ... the traditional political systems, old elites, and the old ideologies” (Kimura 2009, 171). He is said to have been using “strong messages of criticism for the old elites” as “one of the most effective populist strategies” (Kimura 2023, 323). This is echoed by accounts claiming that Roh “often criticized the rich and educated for privatizing public interests in Korean society” (Kang 2009, 7), and that he was “widely anti-chaebol and criticized these large conglomerates for being corrupt and irresponsible” (Kang 2009, 6).

Similar attributions can be found for Moon, who is seen to qualify as a populist because he “dismissed the economists as mouthpieces for a ‘privileged few’ when his administration was attacked for its policy on “raising the minimum wage (a not untypical populist policy)” (Shin 2020, 110). Moon is also accused of employing a “political discourse [that] is centered on moral debates of right and wrong,” and it is said that, during his incumbency, “plebiscite[s] ha[d] more legitimacy than decisions made by the elite” (Lee 2021, 36–37). Furthermore, the Moon administration is characterized as an example of “chauvinist[ic] populism” (Shin 2020, 109), which exacerbates political polarization and undermines democratic norms

because it “demonizes the opposition” (Shin 2020, 101). Liberal governments such as Moon’s are described as “preening themselves on their own moral superiority as they stress ideological purity and embrace a politics of confrontation, resentment, and even hatred” (Shin 2020, 101). Thus, for this author, the Moon administration’s “populist character was most clearly revealed in its campaign to “eradicate deep-rooted evils,” which refer to the old elite’s order (Shin 2022). Similar accusations of antagonistic behavior are leveled at former Governor Lee Jae-myung. For example, he is found to have “criticize[d] the existing representative politics and Yeouido politics centered on political parties” (Chae 2019, 66), which “confirms his identity as a left-wing populist who advocates for the overthrow of the political and economic establishment” (Chae 2019, 70). Lee also “firmly insists on the dissolution of the chaebol, the normalization of basic income and tax burden” (Chae 2019, 65).

Regarding the idea of popular sovereignty Moon is said to have promoted “people’s sovereignty on a practical level through the realization of a sovereign democracy where people directly participate and decide” (Lee and Lim 2022, 17), which is described as part of “populist strategies to secure the support of the people and workers in order to consolidate its power after coming to power” (Lee and Lim 2022, 26). Similarly, others argue that the Moon administration pursued a “movement-oriented democracy” (Choi 2020; 2021), which was also evidenced by the administration’s claim that the candlelight demonstrations were a “candlelight revolution” (Choi 2021, 5) and by its idolization of their participants as “candlelight citizens” and “woke citizens.” Ultimately, it is argued that the Moon administration believed that only they could represent the entire citizenry, which is thus a manifestation of “moralized anti-pluralism” and their idea of democracy through “people acting outside the system” (Choi 2020, 16).

In terms of antagonizing the foreign Other, Roh is marked as populist due to having attempted to make his foreign policy independent of U.S. influence (Kang 2009, 10; similarly, see Yi 2007), and because in foreign policy questions he “focus[ed] more on public opinion at home than on the views of diplomats” (Rozman and Lee 2006, 763, 781). Also, Moon is seen as part of the “rise of leftwing populism,” who “adopted an anti-Japanese stance by combining populism with nationalism” (Shin 2020, 459), whose “populist implication is that the government should no longer enforce unjust treaties and international laws with respect to Japan” (Yi, Phillips, and Lee 2019, 499). In addition, Moon is found to have “praised Admiral Yi Sun Shin, a national hero known for fighting the Japanese,” “serving prawns caught near ... Dokdo ... at a state banquet for President Trump,”<sup>3</sup> “reciprocated with its own travel ban” against Japan (Shin 2020, 109–10), and “terminated the 2015 Korea–Japan accord” (Yi, Phillips, and Lee 2019, 499) regarding the “comfort women” issue.

### Communication

Regarding the style of communication with the citizens, labeling Roh as populist is related to the fact that he “very often appeared on TV” and that he “sent many messages” on the Internet to appeal directly to the people using social media and thus bypassing party organizations and the mainstream media (Kimura 2009; see also Kimura 2007, 289; Kimura 2023, 323; Kim 2004, 137; Shin 2005, 66). Other indicators of unmediated interaction are Roh’s attempt to make use of the “national referendum,” because he “challenged the parliament to impeach him by holding a



defiant press conference,” and due to his overall style of “lingering emotionalism” (Kang 2009, 7–8; see also Rozman and Lee 2006, 781). Similarly, the Moon administration is seen as circumventing intermediary institutions due to its governing style based on public opinion and communication through social media (Choi 2020, 16). And Lee is identified as a populist because he displayed agitation through simplification rather than deliberation and debate, and he appealed directly to the people through social media rather than through “representative politics” (i.e., political parties) (Chae 2019, 66).

### *Leadership*

The labelling of an outsider-turned-political leader can also be found in the literature. For example, Roh is described as a “complete outsider to the traditional political society of South Korea” (Kang 2009, 10), who “managed to maintain his outsider image throughout his political career” (Kang 2009, 6), and seized the opportunity “at end of the Kim Dae-jung era [when] distrust of party politics created an opening for an anti-political establishment by outsiders” (Kang 2009, 6). Other accounts on Roh evaluate him as “not an original member of the Outsiders [but someone who] had shared similar experiences as them” (Kimura 2009, 174), who “gradually became very close” with them, which led to the (alleged) “fact that the Roh Moo-hyun government was established with the political support of the Outsiders had a great influence on its direction and performance” (Kimura 2009, 175). Lee, too, is found to have styled himself as an outsider and a charismatic leader with an image of a “marginalized person” (Chae 2019, 67) “rebelling against mainstream politics” with a “sharp tongue and mocking code as his ‘trademark.’” (Chae 2019, 68).

### *Policy*

In terms of mass-opportunism, parts of the literature see the “launch of many reform plans” as an indicator that Roh was a populist, especially since these plans allegedly “did not show any grand design,” and were “unrealistic, irresponsible policies” designed to win popular support (Kimura 2009, 168; see also Yi 2006, 43). Similarly, the Moon administration is described as having “employed populist strategies to secure the support of the common people and workers in order to consolidate its power,” for example, with regards to policies such as income-led growth and pro-labor, and anti-middle class real estate policies (Lee and Lim 2022, 26; see also Kim Hyung-A 2019). Lee is also seen as a “left-wing populist,” in that he pursued policies with “socialist tendencies” (e.g., “welfare populism”; Chae 2019, 64–66) that are “not feasible” such as basic income and national disaster funding (Chae 2022, 122, 143).

### *Taiwan*

Most of the literature on populism in Taiwan focuses on two former presidents, Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian. Among current politicians, Han Guo-yu and Ko Wen-je have attracted most of the scholarly attention.

### *Antagonism*

The main focus on Taiwanese academic discussions of populist politicians, parties, and movements is on their antagonistic discourses and policies. A major issue is the



“China factor” that politicians in Taiwan often use to mobilize voters, sometimes referred to as “populist nationalism” (Chang 2009, 108). Lie states that populist mobilization in Northeast Asia usually focuses on external threats coming from immediate neighbors (Lie 2019, 207–8).

The first two democratically elected presidents, Lee Teng-hui (1987–2000) and Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), are characterized as antagonistic populists, because they deviate from the former (authoritarian) KMT policies, have emphasized Taiwan’s identity (“ethnic populism”) (Copper 2015, 1–3) and thus antagonized the old KMT elites and mainland China (Shyu 2008, 131; Huang 1995; 2004).

Huang and Tsay define the core of populism as “the people” that are instrumentalized and mobilized against varying and expanding “others” (Huang and Tsay 2015, 136). Lee had mobilized “the people” against “the other”—the conservative forces inside the KMT that opposed democratic reforms (Huang and Tsay 2015).

Chen Shui-bian expanded “the other” to the broader elite stemming from the authoritarian period in Taiwan, as well as mainland China (“new populism”) (Huang and Tsay 2015, 155–56). Chen aimed his attacks against the KMT as “the elite” based on the argument that the party had ignored the voice of the Taiwanese majority of “the people” (Hellmann 2017, 163–64). Chen’s party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is viewed as a populist force in general because it opposed the elitist and authoritarian KMT rule (Chen 2004, 262).

The former mayor of Taipei, Ko Wen-je, and his Taiwan People’s Party are portrayed as populist, because they consider representative democracy to have failed, and they emphasize “the pure people” against “the corrupt elites” of the established two big parties DPP and KMT (Wu and Chu 2021, 47). Ko entered the political stage as a supporter of the Sunflower Movement in 2014 and was elected Taipei mayor as an independent in the same year. The Sunflower Movement protested successfully against the ratification of a trade agreement aiming at the liberalization of services with mainland China (Wu 2020, 216–18). The movement pointed to an antagonism between an elite that encompassed the KMT, big business, and multinational companies during the Ma Ying-jeou administration (2008–2016), and the Sunflower Movement’s participants. The latter consisted mostly of young people with liberal and progressive values who wanted to defend Taiwan’s democracy from the perceived-as-malign influence of mainland China (Wu and Chu 2021, 40). The Sunflower Movement is viewed as a bottom-up model of populism (Wu and Chu 2021, 39).

Han Guo-yu, the unsuccessful KMT candidate for Taiwan’s presidential election in 2020 and current speaker of the Legislative Yuan, is classified as a populist because of his anti-elitism, the use of conspiracy theories, and an anti-expert discourse (Hu and Chiang 2020, 175–176; Krumbein 2023). For example, he said that establishment politicians from the DPP, but also from his own party KMT, were responsible for Taiwan’s economic decline due to their power struggles and their distance from the common people (Batto 2021).

### *Communication*

Chen Shui-bian depicted himself as a “son of Taiwan,” emphasizing that he comes from a family of farmers (Huang 2014, 64). He needed to resort to populist strategies and to appeal to the people directly—so-called “electoral populism”—to be able to govern, because the KMT continued to have a majority in parliament (Huang 2014).

Ko Wen-je was not only a political newcomer but is also an atypical politician, openly—even foolhardily—speaking his mind. Ko has been able to turn this apparent weakness to his advantage and has become popular in the mass and social media, in particular among young people (Wu 2016). He has relied heavily on online campaign techniques and has mainly appealed to unorganized and non-partisan voters (Wu and Chu 2021).

Han Guo-yu also styled himself as an outsider, even though he could look back on a relatively long political career when he re-emerged as the KMT candidate for the local elections in Kaohsiung in the year 2018 (Batto 2021; Krumbein 2023, 22). He has been perceived as media savvy, in particular through his use of social media (Ho 2020, 103–5; Hu and Chiang 2020, 178). Han used a lot of simple slogans to directly appeal to the people, such as “Politics zero points, the economy hundred points” to emphasize that he focuses on the economic well-being of the people (Ho 2020, 104–8). He has styled himself as a “common man” with his direct and simple language, and his dress of a working man (Ho 2020, 104–8). He has also frequently said that he needs only a bottle of mineral water and a bowl of braised pork rice a day, a simple but popular Taiwanese dish (Ho 2020, 104–8). Due to his political style, Han appealed to non-partisan and even DPP voters during the mayoral election in Kaohsiung, and at first also during the presidential campaign (Hu and Chiang 2020, 176).

### *Leadership*

Lee Teng-hui’s presidency has been classified as “populist authoritarianism” because Lee favored electoral instead of liberal democracy. The sole function of the people was to appropriate the name of democracy to meet the requirement for legitimacy for the new Taiwanese “authoritarian regime” (Chien and Wang 1995).

Another way of defining Lee’s “populist authoritarianism” was to emphasize that he implemented democratic reforms and relied on the support of the Taiwanese people (populism). On the other hand, Lee still used the KMT’s political dominance over Taiwan’s state and society to govern the country (authoritarianism) (Huang 2014). The concept of “populist authoritarianism” has been criticized of not convincingly explaining the authoritarian dimension of this definition (Hsieh and Wei 2009).

In academic circles and some media debates, which did not follow academic standards of inquiry, Chen Shui-bian’s policies were described as “populist fascism.” Some authors thought that Chen would create a fascist dictatorship, and he was even described as “Taiwan’s Hitler” (Huang 1995; Schafferer 2010: 142–144).

### *Policy*

Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian both aimed at strengthening the participation and political power of the people, often criticizing the old KMT elites (Huang and Tsay 2015, 156). Ko Wen-je has a similar objective of expanding participatory democracy in Taiwan, as mentioned above. Han Guo-yu wanted to focus mainly on economic policy, on “common-sense” policies to benefit the people (Batto 2021). These policy ideas are often viewed as populist because they favor participatory democracy instead of liberal democracy, and/or convey simple and unrealistic political promises.

## **Results: How and why politicians are categorized as populists**

Given the differences between Japan, South Korea and Taiwan in institutional set-up, democratic history, and dominant political subjects, it comes as no surprise that the labeling of politicians as populists is conducted from different perspectives and based on different issues. The salience of cross-straits relations in Taiwan is just as unique as the Korean issue between North and South. In Japan, the dominance of a single party has no equivalent in the other two countries. Still, our review shows that the literature identifies a number of similarities apparently shared by East Asian populists:

- 1) antagonism towards conservative / old elites and / or other nations,
- 2) atypical communication style,
- 3) charismatic and / or strong leadership of an outsider, and
- 4) mass opportunism and / or reform orientation.

On the following pages, we will elaborate briefly on each of these four commonalities before turning to the “why” question: There are three characteristics that we think underlie not only the findings of most studies but also offer an answer as to why populism is of little interest to many scholars working in the field:

- 1) local political culture as baseline,
- 2) conceptual innovation, and
- 3) political affiliation of scholars (and journalists).

### ***Antagonism towards conservative / old elites and / or other nations***

The key populist characteristic emphasized in the literature is antagonism. Most populists and their (alleged) followers (“us”) find their political bogeymen (“them”) either among the conservative elite and its supporters from the corporate world, or in foreign nations. This kind of adverse attitude is depicted in the literature as going beyond what is generally accepted as standard criticism of political rivals.

Authors identify populism in South Korea and Taiwan often among politicians who criticize elites with roots in the pre-democratic order. In South Korea, antagonism directed against domestic elites is therefore labeled “chauvinistic,” “candlelight” and “left-wing populism.” The proposed evidence for antagonism in both countries also relates to corruption and other misbehavior committed by those in power. Challengers to those in power point out grievances that would be healed once they themselves are voted into office but at the same time may appear to be throwing stones from a glass house. In Japan, there is no alternative to the LDP as target of antagonistic behavior and almost all anti-LDP rhetoric can also be understood as “anti-elitism.” Again, it is the degree to which attacks against the LDP deviate from “normal” oppositional rhetoric which eventually turns critique into populism, even if it comes from within the party itself.

In some cases, antagonism is directed against foreign adversaries. In Taiwan, the “China factor” and the issue of Taiwanese identity is at the heart of this debate, in South Korea it is Japan or US influence. Examples of these types of populism in Taiwan are referred to as bottom-up (as a social movement), new, and ethnic populism, as well as populist nationalism. The labelling of politicians as populists in Taiwan simply because they have China-skeptical positions has recently become less frequent. But the main reason is that the two most prominent politicians in current times who are most often referred to as populists are viewed as China-

friendly, namely Han Guo-yu and Ko Wen-je. Parts of the literature identify these instances as nationalism in the sense of chauvinism, and therefore deem them applicable to populism. In general, however, the cases authors usually refer to are difficult to distinguish from expressions intended to safeguard national sovereignty as stipulated in the constitution. The quoted examples seem quite different from racist or xenophobic rhetoric in many other countries.

### ***Atypical communication style***

A second set of characteristics many politicians share can be summarized as “atypical” elements of political communication. Their rhetoric deviates from standard code, their style of behavior is often described as “performative” or “theatrical.” They stand out, which for some academics seems to be the “initial suspicion” on which to base further investigations for populist qualities. Such “performances” are especially numerous at election time, when candidates volunteer in soup kitchens, distribute coal briquettes in poor neighborhoods, or visit a traditional market to taste food and buy groceries. Ostiguy’s socio-cultural approach (2017) offers the frames of “alienated victimhood” and “authentic representation of the people” to qualify these activities as populist. However, it seems up to the reader to figure out the difference in degree that separates populism from rather typical gestures made by politicians to signal closeness and understanding of the average citizen.

The same is true for an intensive usage of new social media to communicate with potential supporters. “Direct communication with unorganized voters” is one definitional criterion of the political-strategic approach to populism (Weyland 2017), but at the same time it seems hard to imagine a politician not applying these means of communication. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, for example, cannot be (and is not) labeled a populist because of the many video messages posted online to communicate with the public. Most studies on East Asia do not offer any explicit point of comparative reference or information on where the line is drawn between “standard” and “populist” usage of YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, etc.

### ***Charismatic and / or strong leadership of an outsider***

Given the common features in antagonistic messaging and political communication, it comes as no surprise that the literature depicts alleged populists in one way or another as “strong” and/or “charismatic leaders.” They appear at the top of a political movement or party and often manifest key political goals. Again, it is the degree to which they differ from heads of other parties which makes them stand out. Extreme cases are reported from Taiwan. Here we found creative, but mostly nonsensical definitions of populist authoritarianism for President Lee Teng-hui and populist fascism for President Chen Shui-bian. That Lee, who was responsible for Taiwan’s process of democratization, and Chen, who emphasized human rights and individual freedoms (even though he was convicted of corruption later) could be classified as authoritarian or fascist leaders can mainly be explained by the political affiliation of the scholars conducting the respective studies.

Clearly, the label “strong leader” is just as vague—both conceptually and regarding the underlying data—as the category “outsider.” The latter, however, seems to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it signals a populist quality of a politician, but on the other it is expected to have a positive effect on voters. Not being part of the

political establishment is generally assumed to increase likability and public support (even Barack Obama and George W. Bush included this element into their campaigns for president of the US). We found very different types of “outsidership,” some based on family background, professional career, or even the standing *within* the elite. However, only a few of the alleged populists were indeed from outside the political arena which may explain why the literature reports only few instances of politicians claiming to be a “common man”<sup>4</sup>.

### **Mass opportunism and / or reform orientation**

A fourth feature of almost all East Asian populists in the literature can be found in the realm of policy. For one, campaign pledges that promise direct and easily understood benefits to the people are seen as synonymous with populism. Sometimes they are explicitly referred to as manifestations of “mass opportunism” (translated into Japanese as 大衆迎合主義 and into Korean as 대중영합주의), and as such are often used as equivalents of populism in public (journalistic) discourse. We found them in studies in all three countries. These promises are often of an economic or financial nature, but sometimes voters are also promised more participatory rights. Especially when used by political rivals, the critique of “mass opportunism” suggests irresponsible management or even the waste of public resources.

“Reform” is another indicator for policy-based populism. In the literature, scholars use concepts like “neoliberal populism” (Japan) or “left-wing populism” (South Korea) for some cases. Initiatives for change never come without criticism of the status quo, which again is an essential campaign element of all those politicians opposed to conservative establishments. “Reform” therefore can be viewed as fuel for “antagonism,” “anti-elitism” and “mass opportunism” at the same time. As the case of Japan shows better than others, however, it is unclear why some reform proposals are called populist and others are not. What is more, in some cases the populist label may have been applied less because of the specific call for change but rather based on the initiators of the call.

Our review leads us to assume there are three underlying factors in most studies which are responsible for the particular categorizations and which might also be at work in studies on other countries.

### **Local political culture as baseline**

First, populism is generally identified and understood against the background of the local political culture. The label “populist” is attached to politicians who deviate in some way from local standards of political discourse and behavior, standards which have been set by past examples of established politicians, scholars, and journalists. This basic frame of reference seems to be outside the frame of interest of the authors we read. Otherwise, we would have found a discussion of the degree to which “populist” qualities are pronounced, and perhaps a comparison with internationally known populist archetypes. However, this phenomenon is not limited to studies on EAD. There is simply no international standard for many of the elements that make up the dominant definitions of populism. As we argued in our introduction, this problem is compounded by an implicit tendency to ignore the shades of gray that most populist qualities have. As a result, the literature on EAD tends to present cases as either/or, and rarely approaches them as “strong” or “weak” versions of a populist

phenomenon. Even though the more recent literature on populism in EAD tends to apply one or more of the three dominant concepts of populism that we have discussed above, the application of these concepts has still been adapted to the local political culture.

### **Conceptual innovation**

Second, in addition to the degree to which populist qualities are pronounced and binary analytic categories can be misleading, there is a strong tendency to solve conceptual problems by declaring a new variety of (local) populism. The result is a plethora of “populisms with adjectives,” like bottom-up populism, chauvinist populism or populist nationalism as examples of antagonistic types of locally defined populism. Other local varieties of populism refer to an atypical communication style, e.g. telepopulism or theatrical populism, or to a populist leader, e.g. populist authoritarianism. While these qualifying adjectives are justified in some cases, they also add to the challenge of cross-national comparison. We doubt that all of the newly proposed populism (sub)types were created under consideration of comparative efforts. Furthermore, some of these “populisms with adjectives” possess a lot of similarities with the idealational, socio-cultural or political-strategic approaches to populism and hardly warrant the invention of another definition. The “adjectives” rather point at one key feature of the cases under investigation, while often implying at the same time that other elements of populism are less pronounced or even absent. One proposed methodology for addressing the significant heterogeneity present in the data set is through the formation of broad categories, wherein the most analogous cases are grouped together based on their respective causes and effects (Lee, Wu, and Bandyopadhyay 2021, 214). This approach is effective for handling the vast array of cases and for creating a comprehensive cartography of populism in Asia, thereby facilitating a comparative analysis. Nevertheless, the challenge persists in identifying individual cases as genuinely populist on the basis of a unified definition of populism that is not too expansive (see Rummens 2017, 564).

### **Political affiliation of scholars (and journalists)**

Finally, the use of some of these labels can sometimes be explained by the political affiliations of scholars (and journalists). This is particularly the case in South Korea and Taiwan, two highly politicized societies with two competing political camps. After democratization, democratically elected presidents in both countries challenged the power of the old elites. They were often labeled as “populists” because they based their policies on popular support and weakened the power of the old elite, including scholars. The significance of the label “populist” as a tool for political competition reminds us of the overlap of academic concepts and the real world, an overlap that renders any scholarly effort even more complex. Even though the more recent literature on populism in EAD tends to be less politicized and more rigorous in applying the above-mentioned dominant concepts of populism, the politicization is still a characteristic of research on populism in EAD, in particular in South Korea and Taiwan. This politicization is particularly strong in the media landscape, as the coverage of Taiwan’s presidential and parliamentary electoral campaigns in the year 2020 has shown. The pro-KMT newspapers have often classified the DPP candidate,

President Tsai-Ing wen, as a populist, while both the pro-KMT and pro-DPP newspapers have described the KMT presidential candidate Han Guo-yu as a populist (Krumbein 2023).

## Conclusion

In our introduction we asked why the international academic community working on populism seems to be rather incurious about East Asia's democracies. Even though there is a body of literature dealing with populist qualities of certain politicians in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, these studies are seldom discussed or mentioned in handbooks, edited volumes or other comparative work. Following Hellmann's assertion that authors writing on EAD "rarely rely on established definitions of populism" (2017, 161), we conducted a review of pertinent literature to reexamine his assumption and identify alternative explanations for our research question.

We found a number of studies in which authors used an eclectic selection of criteria from the dominant populism concepts and added some local flavor to the mix. Such an eclectic understanding of populism often created a "populism with adjective" and in most cases argued for "mass opportunism" as a reliable indicator for populism. Even though this term may not meet criteria of political science, this local understanding of populism is significant as it has direct empirical implications. If policies like tax reductions or free social services can be turned into accusations of "pandering to the masses," populism becomes a *Kampfbegriff* and as such an instrument of political competition. It is taken up by the mass media, eventually appears in academic work (cf. Howse 2019), and is therefore relevant to our engagement with populism in EAD.

One of the few studies *consistently* applying one of the three dominant approaches is the paper by Hieda, Zenkyo, and Nishikawa (2019). They analyze the case of Tokyo governor Koike Yuriko through the lens of the ideational approach. Their analysis, however, points at another potential answer to our question: most studies are based on an implicit and generally unreflective usage of local political culture and standards as the baseline for identification of populist qualities. This is not only a characteristic of research on EAD. Very few studies on populism ever make explicit what their benchmark for populist behavior is. At what point does criticism of the government tilt towards anti-elitism? From what point on does an appeal to voters qualify more as an appeal to "the people"? And which expressions make the people "virtuous"? Comparative studies mostly imply that a "Manichean struggle," "personalistic leadership," "folkloric performances," or "transgressive behavior" manifest themselves in similar ways in political cultures everywhere. But this is clearly not the case. The assumption may be due to an academic majority working on polities with sledgehammer populists so far beyond the definitional demarcation line that the question of degree never arises. These scholars' work dominates the literature, and they may find little benefit in looking at political cultures in EAD with apparently less pronounced cases.

In addition, EAD do not feature many of the key factors believed to be crucial for the emergence and the growth of populism: extreme wealth inequality, large scale immigration, strong polarization between urban and rural regions, a disjuncture between citizens' demands and the policies supplied etc. (Berman 2021). There are also very few signs of conspiracy theories. If a crucial goal of populism studies is to



understand why and how “democratic backsliding” is caused, EAD do not lend themselves for deeper insights.

Another interesting finding is the degree to which “the people” are (not) part of East Asian populism. In the few cases in which moralizing and idealizing of the “pure” and “virtuous people” can be found in the literature, they rather come in the form of ascribed intentions of alleged populists, and not as actual utterances from those politicians. The three cases from Japan feature conservatives with neoliberal visions competing with the permanently ruling LDP. They seem to stay outside of populist code when they talk about their voters. Alleged populists in South Korea and Taiwan refer more often to “the people” (“us”). However, as Müller (2016, 22) put it: For “a political actor or movement to be populist, it must claim that a part of the people *is* the people” [emphasis in original]. There is less evidence of this kind of rhetoric in studies on EAD than in studies on Europe or the US.

A final piece of the puzzle may be the data on which analyses of the supply side of populism are based. In almost all studies we looked at, anecdotal evidence had to do the “heavy lifting.” Authors often draw on an eclectic collection of instances of political communication like campaign performances, press conferences, speeches etc. However, only very seldom are these texts analyzed in a methodologically stringent and thorough way. We have found no systematic study of party platforms, election programs or websites. Hardly ever do we learn about time periods under investigation or changes in communication style over time.

In conclusion, our literature review and our analysis do not only bring home again the significance of robust data, conceptual clarity and common definitional ground for any comparative and theoretical endeavor. They also confront us with the question of what to use as a baseline for the measurement of potentially populist phenomena. One option is to identify internationally accepted manifestations of populism and measure any political behavior anywhere in the world against these archetypes. Such an approach, however, runs the risk of excluding the perspectives and perceptions of local populations and regional understandings of populism.

Option two is to measure any potentially populist phenomenon against a baseline of non-populist behavior as understood in the particular polity. Here, the focus is on deviation from what is locally considered standard political behavior. Such an approach would reflect the public image of the particular political actor/party within the polity under investigation. After all, it is the local population that will vote for or against these political actors. Such an approach may bring scholars studying EAD and those working on other world regions closer together and make the international political science community a bit more curious about populism in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Moreover, our literature review of populism scholarship in EAD also raises challenging questions for the broader comparative field of populism studies, such as the tricky task of how to measure or classify populism. Is the use of direct communication channels, such as the use of TikTok, in itself enough to be coded as populist, or how should we determine a meaningful threshold? Similarly, acting “anti-government” is considered a typical element of the populist repertoire, but does this mean that we should categorize any activity that engages in some form of critical behavior toward the government as populist? Relatedly, a common denominator for identifying populism is its antipathy toward the status quo, but that status quo can and does change over time and space. These questions are not new—indeed they receive attention in the critical parts of the populism literature. Our findings illustrate

once again how important it will be to find answers in order to advance the comparative field of populism studies by sharpening our conceptual toolkit and considering empirical variations from the hitherto neglected world region of East Asia and beyond.

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## Notes

1. We refer to East Asia as that part of the world which includes not only the three liberal democracies under scrutiny in this paper, but also the PR China, North Korea, Mongolia, Hong Kong and Macau.
2. Mind you, political opponents also likened him to Adolf Hitler for his alleged dictatorial tendencies to take decisions on his own.
3. Dokdo is a South Korean group of small islets that Japan calls Takeshima and claims as its territory. South Korea currently administers the islands and maintains a small police force, while Japan claims historical sovereignty over them, arguing that they were illegally occupied after World War II.
4. Koike Yuriko, the only female politician in our review, apparently never argued to be a “woman of the people.”

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