Unpacking “the West”: Divergence and Asymmetry in Chinese Public Attitudes towards Europe and the United States

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Abstract

Recent public opinion polls conducted in Europe and the United States show increasingly negative views of China. Does the Chinese public hold similar views of “the West”? Conducting a two-wave survey in China, we found great divergence and asymmetries in Chinese public perceptions. First, Chinese views of European countries and the US diverge sharply, despite these countries being typically grouped together as “the West” in mainstream English and Chinese discourses; the Chinese viewed the US much more negatively than Europe. Second, whereas the Chinese reciprocated American antipathy, there was an asymmetry in public perceptions between China and Europe, with the Chinese expressing much greater favourability towards European countries than the other way around, though the degree of favourability still varied by country. Analyses of respondent attributes also yielded insights that both confirm and challenge some of the conventional wisdom regarding age, education, and party membership in Chinese public opinion.

Keywords: China-Europe Relations; Public Opinion; Nationalism; China-US Relations

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Introduction

According to a recent survey of citizens in fourteen developed economies, conducted by the Pew Research Center in October 2020, negative views of China in these countries have reached historic highs (Silver et al. 2020). The survey results remained unchanged eight months later (Silver et al. 2021). Many media outlets and policy makers have frequently referenced these findings as evidence that China has a “global image problem” (Buckley 2020; Chandler and McGregor 2020; Ching 2020). What has not been explored, however, is whether these negative feelings are mutual. If so, then there is more than a mutual image problem: the space for governments to co-operate on such pressing issues as global health and climate change will be narrowed; politicians on both sides will have little incentive to engage in long-term co-operation to address these issues, lest they be criticised domestically for appearing weak in front of an assertive China or Western hegemony. Moreover, mutual animosity raises the concern of a military conflict between China and the US with its allies (Lee 2021; Tiezzi 2022).

So how do Chinese citizens perceive the West? Surprisingly, there is little systematic research on the question. In this analysis, we aim to address the gap by presenting findings from a pair of new surveys in China, one conducted before the 2020 American presidential election and the other right after Biden’s 2021 inauguration. Similar to the Pew surveys and most other surveys on public opinion about foreign countries, we asked Chinese respondents whether they held positive or negative views on the United States (US) and nine European countries — Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK).

We discovered surprising divergences and asymmetries in Chinese views toward the West. While “the West” is frequently referred to as a block in both the English and the Chinese media, in fact, there was considerable variation in Chinese attitudes towards the countries in our survey. First, Respondents’ views of the US were highly negative, suggesting that the hardening feelings of the
publics are mutual in the US and China. In sharp contrast, the Chinese respondents had substantially more positive views of the European countries in general. In particular, we found that compared to the older generation, young Chinese were less likely to express positive feelings towards the US but more likely to express positive views of all the European countries in the survey. In addition, the more nationalistic respondents and members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) viewed the US less favourably, but this was not so for most of the European countries. Second, there were asymmetries in public perceptions between China and Europe, with the Chinese expressing much greater favourability towards European countries than the other way around, though the degree of favourability still varied by country.

The rest of this analysis is organized into four sections. The second section reviews the existing literature on why and how Chinese public opinion matters for foreign policy and describes our survey research design. The third and fourth sections present the findings of the survey, first regarding the overall pattern of favourability and then by respondent characteristics. We conclude by summarizing the findings and discussing their policy implications.

**Investigating Chinese Public Opinion about Western Countries**

Policy makers and pundits alike have long used public opinion surveys to gauge attitudes towards foreign countries and explore their sources and consequences. Most such surveys have been conducted in democracies (Aldrich et al. 2006; Baum and Groeling 2010; Baum and Potter 2008; Baum and Potter 2015; Gelpi 2017; Grieco et al. 2011; Kertzer and Zeitoff 2017; Milner and Tingley 2016; Nincic and Russett 1979; Semetko et al. 1992), under the assumption that public opinions matter in countries where people can meaningfully vote (de Mesquita et al. 2003; Leeds 1999; Leeds 2003; Oneal and Russett 2001; Tomz et al. 2020). Yet, this hardly means that leaders in authoritarian countries can afford to ignore public sentiments when making consequential
foreign policies. In fact, it has long been recognized that authoritarian leaders are “highly conscious of public opinion” (Pool 1973, p. 463), and this has been particularly true for those that rely on nationalism as a major source of legitimacy (Snyder 2018).

China is a major example of public opinion mattering for foreign policy making in an authoritarian state (Fang et al. 2022; Zhu 2011). Beijing is constantly under domestic pressure to defend Chinese interests globally (Bishop 2020; Welch 2012), and its diplomats are keenly aware that their performances on the world stage are being watched by the Chinese public (Weich 2012; Zhu 2020). While developing sophisticated censorship technologies (Roberts 2018), the Chinese government has also been proactive in responding to and incorporating public opinion in decision making. Just like their counterparts in the West, Chinese leaders prefer making foreign policies that align with the dominant preferences of the public rather than otherwise (Gries and Wang 2021; Jia 2019; Yang 2011). The underlying logic of this responsiveness is not simply to satisfy the nationalistic sentiments of domestic audiences, but also to provide the public with a sense of participation in foreign policy making, both of which strengthen governing legitimacy (Fang et al. 2022). Congruence between public preferences and foreign policy has the additional benefit of mobilizing societal resources to achieve foreign policy goals (Chubb 2016).

This understanding has led to an emerging literature that explores mass preferences about China’s foreign policy choices on specific issues ranging from trade and investment to territorial disputes (Fang and Li 2020; Li and Chen 2021; Quek and Johnston 2018; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). What is lacking, however, are studies on Chinese public opinion about the outside world more broadly. The few relevant surveys have focused on Chinese public opinion toward the US (Chen 2003; Fang et al. 2022; Moore 2021; Saunders 2000; Shambaugh 1993; Weiss 2014), while little is known about Chinese attitudes toward other nations, especially the European countries that are
often grouped together with the US as the “West.” This study takes a first step toward filling the gap.

Specifically, we conducted a two-wave survey in China, separated by the US presidential election, with the first completed between 29 October and 3 November 2020 and the second between 25 January and 2 February 2021. In total, we recruited a sample of 2,083 Chinese adults from Qualtrics’ online opt-in panel using a quota sampling strategy that targeted pre-specified proportions of gender, age group, and geographic location in the latest census. Like many similar surveys that gauge public sentiments about foreign countries, our question was stated as the following: “What’s your view on the following set of countries?” Respondents could choose from “very favourable,” “favourable,” “unfavourable,” “very unfavourable,” or “don’t know.”

In addition, we asked a battery of sociodemographic questions on gender, age, education, CPC membership, geographical location, religion, ethnicity, and household registration status. We also asked questions that tapped into the respondents’ degree of nationalism and their knowledge about the Chinese military. Tables A1–3 in the appendix summarize all respondent attributes for our full sample and the sub-samples of the two waves. We did not find discernible differences between the two waves in either the sociodemographic variables or the outcome measures (Table A4). We thus pool the data from both waves for subsequent analyses.

**Main Findings**

First, we look at aggregate responses to the key survey question without considering the impact of personal attributes. Of the ten countries, the US is the only one that received well over 70 per cent negative responses, as indicated by the first row in Figure 1. This is surprising, because merely one year earlier in October 2019, only 17 per cent of the Chinese respondents reported having unfavourable feelings towards the US, according to a study conducted by the Eurasia Group. This meant that animosity from the Chinese public expanded dramatically within a year.
The UK came next in terms of unfavourableness, with close to 50 per cent of our respondents reporting negative feelings. This might be due to the fact that the UK has been a close ally of the US in pressuring China on a number of contentious issues — e.g. calling for independent investigations into the pandemic’s origin, criticising Chinese policies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and joining the US in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. On the other hand, the Chinese public viewed the continental European countries much more positively as a whole compared with the US and the UK, with those holding favourable views close to or more than twice as many as those with unfavourable views, despite many of these countries having criticized China on similar issues.

Your opinion of the following countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Very Favourable</th>
<th>Somewhat Favourable</th>
<th>Somewhat Unfavourable</th>
<th>Very Unfavourable</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Italy</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>52</td>
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Figure 1

Chinese views of Western countries. Source: Authors’ survey.
Additionally, there are noticeable within-group variations. In particular, Germany stands out as the country most favoured by the Chinese. The share of explicitly negative views stood at only around 23 per cent, the lowest in the survey. More importantly, 69 per cent of the respondents expressed either “very favourable” or “somewhat favourable” views of Germany. What might explain this high level of favourability? Economic exchanges remained the most crucial component of the Germany–China relationship under the leadership of Angela Merkel. In 2021, for the sixth consecutive year, China was Germany’s biggest trading partner, with EUR 245.4 billion worth of goods traded between the two in the year (Destati 2022). While Germany has been critical of China’s human rights record and has supported smaller European countries in confronting Beijing (Zachová 2017), it has maintained that it will not pick sides in the China–US strategic rivalry (Mai 2021). This was widely reported in the Chinese media and might have fostered additional positive feelings towards Germany (Beijing Daily 2021).

Figure 2 juxtaposes our findings with those from the 2021 Pew survey (Silver et al. 2020, 2021), offering a comparison between the Chinese and Western publics’ views of each other. Such a comparison has not been made before in the existing literature. The circles represent the percentage of negative Chinese views on Western countries, and the triangles indicate the percentage of negative Western views towards China. It is clear that negative feelings between the Chinese and Americans are mutual, which reflects the highly publicized deteriorating bilateral relationship since the beginning of the trade war under the Trump presidency (Fang et al. 2022). In contrast, Chinese respondents held much more positive attitudes towards the European countries than the other way around. It is also noteworthy that there are variations in the “perception gaps,” reflected in the varying lengths of the lines connecting the circles and triangles. For example, whereas a large negative perception gap exists between Sweden and China, the difference in the case of the UK is considerably smaller. Overall, the Chinese public held much more positive views toward the European countries than the other way around.
Figure 2

Negative Perceptions between China and the West.

Note: Negative perceptions in percentage points combine responses of “strongly unfavourable” and “somewhat unfavourable.” For Denmark, we use data from the 2020 survey as it was not included in the 2021 survey. Sources: Authors’ Survey and Pew Global Attitudes Survey.

What explains the large perception gaps? First, Chinese public perceptions are more likely based on information about Western governments’ stances and actions than Western publics’ viewpoints about China. There is simply more media attention on the former. Second, governments in general tend to be more strategic and measured than ordinary citizens in expressing their positions publicly. This is because governments have broader national interests to protect in foreign relations and have more information than the public about foreign countries through direct interactions and official visits. These two factors combined suggest that there is little reason for the Chinese public to develop strongly negative perceptions of European countries.

Third, it may also be the case that China’s state-controlled media have soft-pedalled negative European public opinion towards China for various reasons, such as to maintain a narrative that
China is well perceived by foreign countries, or to avoid inciting backlash from the Chinese public toward the European countries, which could constrain the government’s policy choices. Finally, the United States has dominated the Chinese public’s attention toward foreign nations for a long time, and such disproportionate attention has turned negative and intensified further since the Trump presidency. This also could explain the smaller public perception gaps between the US and China, while the negative views of the Chinese toward European countries have been less intense and more diffuse.

**Personal Attributes and Attitudes**

Are Chinese attitudes towards Western countries driven by people’s personal attributes? In the following analyses, we estimated a series of logistic regressions for every country in the survey. The dependent variable is a binary measure constructed from the responses to the favourability question, with one indicating “very favourable” or “somewhat favourable” and zero otherwise. We then focus on three respondent attributes as independent variables that are commonly examined in the literature: age, nationalism, and CPC membership (Johnston 2017; Wang et al. 2021).

For age, we include four dummy variables—born in the 1960s or earlier, in the 1970s, in the 1980s, and in the 1990s or later, with the first one omitted as the baseline category. To measure nationalism, we use evaluations of five statements commonly used to tap nationalism (e.g. I am proud to be Chinese) (Johnston 2017; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Respondents who agreed with all five statements are considered “nationalists.” CPC membership is a dummy variable that equals one if the respondent is a current member of the CPC and zero otherwise. Additionally, all the other demographic variables were included as controls in the regression analyses.
Figure 3
Predicting Chinese Attitudes from Individual Attributes.

Note: Variables included in the analyses are summarized in Table A1. Full results of the logistic regression models for the two waves of samples, both combined and separately, can be found in Table A5 in the appendix. Source: Authors’ Survey.

Figure 3 presents the average marginal effects of the three personal attributes, which are calculated as the average of changes in the predicted probabilities for favourable responses as a result of the respondents having that attribute of interest (born in the 1990s or later, nationalist, or CPC member). The bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals. Bars located below the horizontal lines indicate that a given attribute is associated with less favourable views on the particular country, compared to respondents without such an attribute. Similarly, if a bar is located above the horizontal line, it means that the attribute has a positive impact on respondents’ evaluation of that country, compared to respondents with no such attribute.
One 2019 survey jointly conducted by China Youth Daily and the Communist Youth League found that young Chinese are “no longer looking up to the West,” with well over 90 per cent of them expressing pride in China’s accomplishments and confidence in its future development (Zhou 2019). More recently, a survey conducted by Global Times, a state-run newspaper, showed that 41.7 per cent of young Chinese now “look down on the West” (Yang et al. 2021). Anecdotal evidence from Chinese social media seems to corroborate this impression, prompting some authors to state that “many young Chinese citizens are not only angry about U.S. foreign policy — they are also expressing growing disdain for the West’s most fundamental social and political ideas” (Freymann and Wong 2021).

Results from our survey suggest that such an assessment may not be warranted when attitudes towards individual countries in “the West” are unpacked. Compared to the baseline group of respondents born in the 1960s or earlier, the “post-90ers,” i.e. those born during or after the 1990s, were indeed 11 per cent less likely to hold favourable views of the US. However, we find that the post-90ers in fact held more favourable views of all the European countries in our study, even the UK, which received by far the most negative views among the European countries.

The greater antipathy towards the US by the post-90ers may be explained by how they react differently to the dominance of concerns over US–China competition that are prevalent in the Chinese public in general. In particular, much of the lifespan of the post-90ers overlaps with the rise of China in the last twenty years as a global economic and military superpower, which gives them more confidence in the ongoing US–China rivalry compared with the older generation. However, the fact that they view the European countries more favourably suggests that there are important countervailing factors at play as well. Better living conditions, more advanced communication technologies, and globalization have provided the post-90ers with more
opportunities to experience the outside world — directly and indirectly — through travelling, studying, or being exposed to much more information about foreign cultures and values than their parents’ generation. European countries have long been viewed (along with the US) as wealthier, more advanced socially and technologically, and rich in history and culture. With the absence of a rivalry similar to that between the US and China, such enhanced exposure to the outside world may have brought more positive views toward the European countries among the younger generation of Chinese.

**Nationalism**

Rising Chinese nationalism has received much attention from the outside world, and from some within China, as a cause for concern (Wang 2021). Ex-diplomats in China have recently highlighted the need to prevent “extreme nationalism” from further tarnishing China’s international image (Lo 2020). The results in Figure 3 suggest that not all countries have become targets of such sentiments. Nationalists do not necessarily hold more negative feelings towards all Western countries. As with our main finding, the negative views from nationalistic respondents were directed towards the US, but the difference is not especially large: they were 7 per cent less likely to express favourable views towards the US. For the rest of the European countries in our study, nationalism is not associated with more or less negative feelings, though respondents were slightly less approving of France and Italy.

**CPC Membership**

Since taking office in 2012, President Xi has emphasized effective and comprehensive control of the party over Chinese society, but first and foremost over its 90-plus million party members. More recently, flagship party magazines and newspapers have warned against potential Western ideological influence (Li et al. 2018). Therefore, one may expect CPC members to be more
disapproving of the West, as they should be more inclined than the general public to accept the party line.

Our survey findings, however, provide mixed support for this conjecture. Once again, a divergence of views towards the US and Europe emerges: whereas party members are about 7 per cent less likely to express favourability towards the US than non-party members, no such difference exists for any of the European countries in the survey. One plausible explanation is that, similar to the general public, the vast majority of ordinary party members have received much less negative reporting about other European countries compared with the US, due to the intense Chinese media focus on the US–China rivalry.

Military Knowledge

Although we will not delve into all the other respondent attributes due to space constraints, an additional individual attribute is worth a brief discussion. We find that the military knowledge of the respondent turns out to be a consistently significant factor for all country analyses; those with better knowledge of China’s military development — e.g. being able to correctly name the most advanced type of Chinese destroyer — hold more unfavourable views of all Western countries. These individuals are not necessarily more nationalistic; the correlation between the measures of military knowledge and nationalism is quite small ($r = 0.05$). A possible explanation is that those cognizant of China’s military prowess are also more keenly aware of possible conflict scenarios between China and the West, such as those over Taiwan and South China Sea territorial disputes, and thus are more likely to view Western countries through the lens of military rivalry.

Conclusion

Numerous public opinion surveys have been conducted to investigate Western public attitudes towards China, which provides information regarding the domestic incentives that Western
governments face in their relations with China. On the other hand, little extant research exists on the Chinese views of the Western countries, particularly of the European countries. Because domestic politics can be an important driver of a country’s foreign policies regardless of regime type, the missing half of the story, that is, how Chinese public view the outside world, is an important gap to be filled for both theoretical and practical purposes.

This study presents the first set of evidence of Chinese views toward the West and contrasts it with the results from surveys of Western public attitudes toward China. The results uncovered two interesting patterns that have never been identified in the existing scholarship on China. First, we find that there is no single “West” in the eyes of the Chinese public despite the frequent usage of the term in the news media everywhere; Chinese public perceptions of the US and Europe diverged sharply. While the Chinese public reciprocates American negative views of China, their views of the European countries are much more favourable, with variations across the set of the European countries. Second, we find that there is a significant divide between how the Chinese public views the European countries and how the European publics view China; the Chinese public hold much more positive views towards the European countries than the other way around.

What could explain the divergence and asymmetry? We proposed several possible explanations that can be investigated in future research, including the Chinese public forming their perceptions from the reported behaviour of the European governments, which tend to be more measured in their stances than their publics are, the possibility that the Chinese government has soft-pedalled European criticisms of China, and long-standing disproportionate attention devoted to the US–China relations by the Chinese media and public.

Analyses of respondent attributes also yielded insights that challenge some of the conventional and popular wisdom. For example, contrary to the common characterization that younger Chinese
have become more antagonistic towards the West and even disdainful of Western values (Zhou 2019; Freymann and Wong 2021), our findings suggest a more complicated picture: while they are less likely to hold positive views of the US than the older generation, young Chinese are in fact more likely to hold positive views of the European countries.

Moreover, whereas many have warned that Chinese nationalism is rising to the extent that it is now causing trouble for China’s international image (Lo 2020; Wang 2021), we find that Chinese nationalists hold more negative feelings only towards the US, and their opinions on the vast majority of the European countries in fact do not differ from those of the less nationalistic. Finally, although one might expect that party members could exhibit greater hostility towards Western countries given heightened ideological discipline under Xi, they turned out to be only showing slightly greater negative attitudes towards the US.

It remains to be seen whether the more positive views held by the Chinese regarding Europe will endure in the shadow of great power competition. If negative public perceptions of China persist in European countries, their governments may become more strident in their criticisms of China, for domestic reasons. This could then set in motion a feedback loop whereby Chinese public perceptions of the European countries deteriorate as well, leading to the closing of the perception gaps. Much like what has transpired between the US and China, this could further narrow the scope of cooperation between China and Europe. Nevertheless, for the time being, European countries may be able to capitalize on their positive images in the eyes of the Chinese people to facilitate cooperation with China on issues of mutual interest, such as climate change, and may play a unique role in mediating tensions between the world’s two superpowers.
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