



Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden

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Abstract

Numerous public opinion surveys have found that Americans' views of China have become extremely negative in recent years. Much less is understood about the trends in Chinese views of the USA and the countries' bilateral relations. As leaders in both countries have come under public pressure about their policy stances toward the other side, it is critical to fill the gap. This study develops a theoretical argument about how a concern for political legitimacy may allow public opinion to influence foreign policy making in authoritarian countries, and it presents findings from a two-wave public opinion survey in China conducted before and after the 2020 US presidential election. The results show that Chinese evaluations of the bilateral relationship and of the USA slumped during the Trump era but rebounded somewhat after Biden took office. In addition, the majority of Chinese respondents believed their country to be the world's largest and leading economy and favored China being the world's leading power, either by itself or alongside the USA. Furthermore, younger and more educated respondents held more negative views, although these were mitigated by personal connections with and experiences in the USA. These findings have important policy implications.

Introduction

In the first top-level meeting between the Biden administration and the Chinese government, on 18 March 2021 in Anchorage, Alaska, the two teams went off script on live television and exchanged heated words that were broadcast around the globe.¹ Remarks by China's foreign affairs chief, Yang Jiechi, went viral on China's social media platforms, with hundreds of thousands of views, shares, and comments.² A particular message from Yang to

¹ Nikkei Asia, "How It Happened: Transcript of the US-China Opening Remarks in Alaska," 19 March, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/How-it-happened-Transcript-of-the-US-China-opening-remarks-in-Alaska>; Matthew Lee and Mark Thiessen, "US, China Spar in First Face-to-Face Meeting under Biden," *AP News*, 19 March 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-alaska-antony-blinken-yang-jiechi-wang-yi-fc23cd2b23332fa8dd2d781bd3f7c178>.

² Huang Lanlan and Yang Sheng, "Netizens Applaud Chinese Delegation's Sharp Response to US at Alaska Talks," *Global Times*, 19 March 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218897.shtml>; Justin McCurry, "US and China Publicly Rebuke Each Other in First Major Talks of Biden Era," *The Guardian*, 19 March 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/19/us-china-talks-alaska-biden-blinken-sullivan-wang>.

his American counterparts, “This is not the way to deal with Chinese people,” was an instant hit. The tone of the words in Chinese was in fact more pungent than its English translation and apparently struck a chord with the Chinese public, who had experienced a tumultuous relationship with the USA during the Trump administration and perhaps hoped for a warmer start with President Biden. In a matter of two days, T-shirts, canvas handbags, and phone cases printed with Yang’s retort were selling in online stores.³ There was little question that Yang, a seasoned diplomat who is fluent in English, had the Chinese audience in mind when uttering those strong words—in fact, they were easy to understand in Chinese but so difficult to translate into English that a cottage industry quickly sprang up to generate a “better” translation than the official version.

The episode is one of the clearest anecdotes showing that Chinese leaders are mindful of public perceptions of their performances on the world stage. It is also consistent with a long-held view among China watchers that Chinese leaders are under tremendous domestic pressure to act tough on the international stage and cannot afford to appear soft with their foreign rivals.⁴ Advancements in communication and social media technologies have increased the pressure, as news and nationalistic sentiments can spread like wildfire online, despite sophisticated censorship.⁵ Moreover, compared with domestic events, it is more challenging to censor or “guide” public opinion about foreign affairs, where numerous alternative (both domestic and foreign) sources of information are available. Many of the interactions between the USA and China since the election of Trump in 2016 have played out in public for the entire world to see. Consequently, leaders on both sides have had to react to each other’s policies while being watched by their respective domestic audiences, and the top diplomats in Anchorage were aware of this.⁶

This interaction between foreign policy and domestic politics highlights the importance of understanding public opinion on both sides to manage complex US–China relations. Yet, compared with numerous systematic studies of American public opinion on China and the countries’ bilateral relationship,⁷ Chinese perceptions of the USA and related foreign policy issues are not nearly as well understood. Existing studies and a series of Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Surveys (PGASs) have provided valuable insights into Chinese nationalism and public opinion on a range of global issues,⁸ but they either have focused on specific foreign policy issues or were conducted before Trump’s presidency, during which

³ Reuters, “Sellers of T-Shirts, Phone Cases Make Most of China’s Diplomatic Riposte,” 22 March, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/sellers-t-shirts-phone-cases-make-most-chinas-diplomatic-riposte-2021-03-22/>.

⁴ Jennie Welch, “China’s Domestic Pressures Shape Assertive Foreign Policy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 November 2012, <http://www.cogitasia.com/chinas-domestic-pressures-shape-assertive-foreign-policy/>; Christopher W. Bishop, “To Understand China’s Aggressive Foreign Policy, Look at Its Domestic Politics,” Council on Foreign Relations, 8 October 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/understand-chinas-aggressive-foreign-policy-look-its-domestic-politics>.

⁵ Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁶ Nicole Gaouette, et al., “Extraordinary Diplomatic Clash Signals Tough Times Ahead for the US and China,” CNN, 20 March 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/20/politics/us-china-friction-ahead/index.html>.

⁷ For some examples of American public opinion surveys conducted between 2020 and 2021 on China-related issues, see Laura Silver, et al., “Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19,” *Pew Research Center*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/30/americans-fault-china-for-its-role-in-the-spread-of-covid-19/>; Laura Silver, et al., “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries,” *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>; Laura Silver, et al., “Most Americans Support Tough Stance Toward China on Human Rights, Economic Issues,” *Pew Research Center*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/04/most-americans-support-tough-stance-toward-china-on-human-rights-economic-issues/>; Mohamed Younis, “New High in Perceptions of China as U.S.’s Greatest Enemy,” *Gallup*, 16 March 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/337457/new-high-perceptions-china-greatest-enemy.aspx>. For a recent example of survey experiment on American opinions of China, see Jonathan A. Chu, “Liberal Ideology and Foreign Opinion on China,” *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 65, No. 4 (2021), pp. 960–72.

⁸ For the goal of the PGAS, see https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/dataset/ds00139_en.

significant changes in the bilateral relationship occurred.⁹ This study addresses the gap both theoretically and empirically.

Theoretically, we develop a new argument for why public opinion may influence foreign policy making in authoritarian countries in general, and we provide extensive evidence that in its decision making, the Chinese government has relied on and incorporated sophisticated analysis of online public opinion on both domestic and foreign policy issues.¹⁰ Empirically, we present findings from a two-wave public opinion survey in China conducted immediately before and after the 2020 US presidential election. The survey questions probed Chinese public opinion on a broad range of issues related to US–China relations, the USA, and China’s status in the world vis-à-vis the USA. The purpose of a before-and-after election design was to gauge whether some of the Chinese perceptions were tied to the Trump presidency, which saw an unprecedented rocky relationship between the two countries. To our knowledge, this study is the first to use the same survey instrument to compare changes in Chinese public opinion under two American presidencies. These questions were primarily chosen from several past PGASs related to US–China relations so we could discern changes across time, but we also added new questions relevant to the current geopolitical context.

We highlight our main findings here. First, the Chinese public’s evaluation of US–China relations and of the USA has deteriorated dramatically compared with before the Trump presidency. Second, more respondents believed the USA to be playing a less important role in the world and had less confidence in a US president doing the right thing in world affairs. These assessments improved somewhat after Biden took office, suggesting some but not all of the changes could be attributed to the tenure of President Trump. Third, the majority of the Chinese respondents believed their country to be the world’s leading as well as largest economy and favored China playing a leadership role internationally, either by itself or alongside the USA. Finally, younger and more educated respondents held more negative views, although these were mitigated by personal connections with and experiences in the USA. These findings have important policy implications.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Building on public opinion research that focused on democracies and the literature on authoritarian resilience, we first develop a theoretical argument for why public opinion may influence foreign policy decisions in authoritarian countries, drawing on primary sources of government reports. We then introduce our survey design and present the findings, which are followed by a discussion of whether the Chinese public can develop opinions unfiltered through state propaganda. We conclude by offering some thoughts on the policy and potential long-term implications of the survey findings.

Chinese Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Until recently, public opinion research on foreign policy issues has focused on democracies. This reflects both a common assumption that public opinion matters only in democracies and the fact that there are easily identifiable causal mechanisms for how it matters. Specifically, the literature has identified two channels through which public opinion may influence foreign policy in democracies: selection and responsiveness.¹¹ The selection mechanism refers to citizens’ ability to electorally choose leaders who share their foreign policy

⁹ One exception is the “Survey on How Chinese View the United States,” conducted in July 2019 by the China–United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF) and the Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS) at Peking University.

¹⁰ Guobin Yang, “Internet and Civil Society,” in William S. Tay and Alvin Y. So, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary China* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2012), pp. 437–54; Lianrui Jia, “What Public and Whose Opinion? A Study of Chinese Online Public Opinion Analysis,” *Communication and the Public*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2019), pp. 21–34.

¹¹ Michael Tomz, et al., “Public Opinion and Decisions About Military Force in Democracies,” *International Organization*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2020), pp. 119–43.

preferences, while the responsiveness mechanism refers to leaders' incentive to respond to public opinion while in office "out of concern that rebuffing the public could be politically costly."¹² The evidence from observational or historical data about the effectiveness of these two causal mechanisms is mixed, although a recent experimental study finds support for the working of both.¹³ The mixed evidence has been sufficient to motivate numerous systematic studies of public opinion in the USA and other established democracies on a wide range of foreign policy issues, including the use of military force, impressions of foreign leaders, and the favourability of other countries.¹⁴

In contrast, scant research has probed public opinion on foreign policy issues in authoritarian countries in general, and China in particular. To be sure, research on China's foreign policies, especially those over territorial disputes or the use of military force, is quick to acknowledge the relevance of nationalistic sentiment to the government's hard-line postures.¹⁵ This focus on nationalism, however, sees Chinese public opinion expressed in terms of emotions rather than preferences over issues, as the concept is typically applied in democratic contexts. Moreover, this approach has the effect of directing scholarly attention to issues that are prone to generating emotional responses, overlooking a much wider range of issues over which the public can form preferences that can in turn influence foreign policies.

We argue that while a selection mechanism may not be applicable for public opinion to matter in these countries, a responsiveness mechanism can nevertheless exist. Such responsiveness to public opinion arises from a concern for regime legitimacy rather than for electoral costs. Research on authoritarian resilience has identified political legitimacy, i.e., public perceptions of a regime's right to rule, as a key factor, because such perceptions increase citizens' acceptance of and compliance with a government's authority.¹⁶ Contemporary political philosophy highlights two sources of political legitimacy: procedural legitimacy, characterized by wide and equal citizen participation in decision making, and performance legitimacy, characterized by high-quality outcomes from decisions made.¹⁷ Authoritarian governments are typically viewed as having weak procedural legitimacy, making them more dependent on bringing better outcomes to gain performance legitimacy.¹⁸ Indeed, it is often said that the Communist Party of China (CPC) enjoys performance legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people by raising their living standards through rapid economic growth.¹⁹ However, incorporating public opinion into decision making can enhance procedural legitimacy for authoritarian governments by giving citizens a sense of inclusion and influence on policy decisions. China scholars, for instance, have argued that

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See, for example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2005/07/14/about-the-pew-global-attitudes-project/>.

¹⁵ See, for example, Mark S. Bell and Kai Quek, "Authoritarian Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace," *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (2018), pp. 227–42; Songying Fang and Xiaojun Li, "Historical Ownership and Territorial Disputes," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2020), pp. 345–60; Songying Fang and Fanglu Sun, "Gauging Chinese Public Support for China's Role in Peacekeeping," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2019), pp. 179–201; Xiaojun Li and Dingding Chen, "Public Opinion, International Reputation, and Audience Costs in an Authoritarian Regime," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2021), pp. 543–60; Kai Quek and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2017), pp. 7–36; Jessica Chen Weiss and Allan Dafoe, "Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2019), pp. 963–73.

¹⁶ Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2003), pp. 6–17; Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013), pp. 13–38; Scott Williamson, "Elections, Legitimacy, and Compliance in Authoritarian Regimes: Evidence from the Arab World," *Democratization*, Vol. 28, No. 8 (2021), pp. 1483–504.

¹⁷ Fabienne Peter, "Political Legitimacy," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/legitimacy/>.

¹⁸ Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."

¹⁹ Yuchao Zhu, "Performance Legitimacy and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, No. 2 (2011), pp. 123–40.

a series of input institutions, such as petition offices and public consultations, which allow people to express their concerns and grievances, have existed for decades in China and have contributed to the CPC's legitimacy and resilience.²⁰

Does the Chinese government pay attention to public opinion? And how much attention does the Chinese public pay to foreign affairs? The annual reports titled *Analysis of Public Sentiment on China's Internet* (henceforth referred to as the "Report"), compiled by *People's Daily's* Online Public Opinion and Public Policy Research Center, provide valuable clues for answers to both questions. The first report, published in January 2008, proclaimed that a new mechanism for public opinion to form had emerged in the Information Age.²¹ It observed that individuals were more willing to express their opinions online than in the real world and that the convergence of public opinion online could put enormous pressure on the government. Among other things, the Reports detail the successes and failures of the government at various levels and agencies in handling online public opinion crises each year and note numerous cases where government policies have adapted in response to the crises. Since 2011, foreign policy issues have started to appear on the list of China's "top 20 Internet events of the year." These foreign policy issues include not just territorial disputes in the South China Sea and Diaoyu islands²² but also such events as the 2015 European refugee crisis and President Xi's visit to the USA.²³ In 2016, the US presidential election made it into the top five Internet events of the year, along with the G20 Hangzhou Summit and the South China Sea ruling, while the China-US trade war was by far the most discussed Internet event of 2018, surpassing any domestic events.²⁴ The increasing attention that the Chinese public have paid to foreign affairs likely reflects not just the fact that their country finds itself in a rapidly changing external environment but also a sense that their personal lives may be impacted by China's foreign relations, the trade war being a prime example.

There is also evidence in their rhetoric and postures that Chinese officials do respond to public preferences, as suggested by Yang's remarks in Alaska cited earlier. A further example is the phenomenon of so-called "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy—the widely noted fact that Chinese diplomats have adopted a more vocal and assertive posture in public settings and on social media in the last few years, breaking from a much longer tradition of keeping a low profile.²⁵ The approach has been heavily criticized by Western media and officials and seen as counterproductive to China's foreign relations; however, there is little sign that

²⁰ Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard," p. 14. For examples of such institutions in domestic and public policymaking, see Steven J. Balla, "Is Consultation the 'New Normal?': Online Policymaking and Governance Reform in China," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2017), pp. 375–92; Thomas Bernauer, et al., "Could More Civil Society Involvement Increase Public Support for Climate Policy-Making? Evidence from a Survey Experiment in China," *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 40 (2016), pp. 1–12; Jidong Chen, et al., "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2016), pp. 383–400; Gregory Distelhorst, "The Power of Empty Promises: Quasi-Democratic Institutions and Activism in China," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (2017), pp. 464–98; Jonathan R. Stromseth, et al., *China's Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²¹ Huaxin Zhu, et al., "2007 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao [2007 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China's Internet]," in Xin Ru, et al., eds., *2008 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce [2008 Society of China Analysis and Forecast]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2008), pp. 234–53.

²² Huaxin Zhu, et al., "2012 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao [2012 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China's Internet]," in Wei Li, et al., eds., *2013 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce [2013 Society of China Analysis and Forecast]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2013), pp. 193–212.

²³ Huaxin Zhu, et al., "2015 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao [2015 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China's Internet]," in Peilin Li, et al., eds., *2016 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce [2016 Society of China Analysis and Forecast]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2016), pp. 219–40.

²⁴ Huaxin Zhu, et al., "2016 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao [2016 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China's Internet]," in Lei Fan, et al., eds., *2017 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce [2017 Society of China Analysis and Forecast]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2017), pp. 229–47; Huaxin Zhu, et al., "2018 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao [2018 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China's Internet]," in Peilin Li, et al., eds., *2019 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce [2019 Society of China Analysis and Forecast]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2019), pp. 264–81.

²⁵ Zhiqun Zhu, "Interpreting China's Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, 15 May 2020, <https://the-diplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

it is going away. One plausible explanation for the phenomenon is that Chinese citizens are highly supportive of the new style of public diplomacy.²⁶ From the perspective of the government, as we argued above, aligning with public preferences in foreign policy helps strengthen regime legitimacy; such legitimacy, in turn, facilitates the mobilization of societal resources for achieving foreign policy goals.²⁷

Beyond the rhetoric and postures, substantive policies can also be influenced by public opinion. Rhetoric and postures adopted by high-level diplomats, such as Yang and Blinken in Alaska, can have foreign policy consequences because they commit a government publicly to a hard-line policy position that can be costly to retreat from when specific policies are made. Domestic opposition, international third parties, as well as the public may all scrutinize the connection between words and deeds, and impose various costs if there are obvious inconsistencies between the two. Specific to China, any compromise by the Chinese side coming out of the Alaska meeting would have been seen as bowing to US pressure, and they would have been criticized by the domestic public for not protecting China's national interests; moreover, other countries would have inferred that China did not mean what it said at such a high-profile event, which would have undermined China's international credibility. Neither of these would have been a desirable outcome for the Chinese leadership. Therefore, the public rhetoric and posture made it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve any progress on issues of mutual concern in the first high-level official meeting between the two countries under the Biden administration. Moreover, both sides were henceforth locked into a chilly relationship that would continue for some time, squandering precious opportunities for cooperation, with significant real-world ramifications in times of a global pandemic, climate crisis, and looming economic recessions.

A question remains: given that the Chinese government possesses powerful means to shape public discourse, can the public develop policy preferences that differ from state propaganda? This is an empirical question, and existing evidence suggests the answer is yes. The 2015 Report is instructive in this regard.²⁸ It provides summaries of the top issues that came under public scrutiny that year, the regions that had the most public opinion crises, as well as government agencies that garnered the most public dissatisfaction. It also analyzes how closely the opinions of the state media, opinion leaders, and netizens were aligned over the most talked about issues online between 2007 and 2015, and the level of satisfaction with the government's handling of these issues. The results show that the three groups did not necessarily share the same opinions, and their support for how the government addressed hot-button issues varied over time. On foreign policy matters, state propaganda efforts to manage online public opinion have become more challenging as more Chinese people connect to the outside world, either physically or virtually—Chinese tourists made 169 million outbound trips in 2019;²⁹ 2.5 million Chinese students studied abroad from 2016 to 2019, 80% of whom returned to China;³⁰ and the country's Internet users reached nearly a billion in 2021.³¹ Thus, an understanding of Chinese public opinion will provide

²⁶ Qi Wang, "Over 70% Respondents Believe China's Global Image Has Improved, 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' A Necessary Gesture: GT Poll," *Global Times*, 25 December 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1211003.shtml>.

²⁷ For example, Andrew Chubb argues that since 2012, Beijing has carefully integrated popular nationalistic sentiments into its South China Sea policy, developing "grassroots deterrence" against other disputants and potential foreign interventions into the issue. See Andrew Chubb, *Chinese Popular Nationalism and PRC Policy in the South China Sea*, PhD dissertation (University of Western Australia, 2016).

²⁸ Huaxin Zhu, et al., "2015 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao".

²⁹ Mingjie Wang, "Nation Leads Way for Overseas Travel Resumption," *China Daily*, 1 June 2021, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/01/WS60b570b8a31024ad0bac2a5c.html>.

³⁰ Xinhua News, "China's Education Goes International from 2016 to 2020," 23 December, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/23/c_139611486.htm.

³¹ Palash Ghosh, "China Now Has Almost 1 Billion Internet Users," *Forbes*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/palashghosh/2021/02/04/china-now-has-almost-1-billion-internet-users/?sh=6995d6f126d9>.

an additional source of information about the logic behind China's foreign policy in general and toward the USA in particular.

Our study therefore fills multiple gaps in the international relations research on public opinion. First, it provides a theoretical argument for why public opinion may matter to foreign policy in authoritarian countries in general, and China in particular. Second, the research is one of the first to comprehensively investigate Chinese public perceptions of China-US relations, arguably the most important bilateral relationship in the world for its impact on numerous issues of global concern, from climate change to war and peace. The existing research on related topics primarily focuses on the elite perspectives—i.e., what Chinese international relations experts think of the USA and the relationship.³² Moreover, we present data that are more up-to-date than previous studies, including the PGAS, which collected data before President Trump came into office; since then, significant changes have occurred in both countries' domestic politics, in the bilateral relationship, and in world affairs, including an ongoing global pandemic.³³ Finally, by running our survey immediately before and after the 2020 presidential election, we were able to investigate possible changes in opinion that may go beyond Trump's presidency, which many have viewed as an anomaly in US politics.

Survey Design

To investigate how the Chinese public evaluates China-US relations, as well as these countries' international status vis-à-vis each other, we conducted a two-wave survey in China, with the first one completed between 29 October and 3 November 2020 and the second one between 25 January and 2 February 2021.³⁴ We administered the survey to 2083 Chinese adults (1065 for wave 1 and 1018 for wave 2), using a quota sampling strategy that targeted pre-specified proportions of gender, age group, and geographic location, based on the latest census.³⁵

Table 1 summarizes the key socioeconomic characteristics of the samples in both survey waves—gender, age cohorts (born in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s), education (college degree and above), CPC membership, geographical location (coastal versus interior provinces), religion (Christianity), ethnicity (Han Chinese), and household registration (rural hukou). Also included are measures of the respondents' degree of nationalism, their personal experience with the USA (travel, study, etc.), and their knowledge about China's military force.

³² David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Phillip C. Saunders, "China's America Watchers: Changing Attitudes Towards the United States," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 161 (2000), pp. 41–65; Rosalie Chen, "China Perceives America: The Perspectives of International Relations Experts," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 35 (2003), pp. 285–97; Huiyun Feng, et al., *How China Sees the World: Insights from China's International Relations Scholars* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³³ One exception is the CUSEF-IISS joint survey, which sampled 3216 Chinese citizens in 40 cities as well as 200 experts based in Beijing between 10 June and 6 July 2019. Nevertheless, as the researchers pointed out, the survey was conducted at a time when issues related to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and China-U.S. tech decoupling had not become as contentious as they are today. See IISS, "Summary of Survey Report on Mutual Perceptions between China and the United States," 2019, <https://www.cusef.org.hk/en/what-we-do/research/?openPdfLink=%2Fresources%2Fpublications%2Fsummary-of-survey-report-on-mutual-perceptions-between-china-and-the-us.pdf>.

³⁴ We recruited survey subjects using the Qualtrics online sample service. Qualtrics maintains online panels of respondents in many countries, China included, who take surveys in exchange for small cash payments. Solicited respondents were provided a link by Qualtrics that redirected them to the survey, where they read the consent information before proceeding to the questionnaire.

³⁵ Like the probability-based stratified sampling method, proportional quota sampling aims to achieve a spread across the target population by specifying who should be recruited for a survey according to certain groups or criteria. Operationally, the target sample is split into strata proportional to the Chinese population on the three variables of age, gender, and geographical location. Qualtrics then fills the quota based on respondents who match the characteristics of each stratum.

Table 1. Summary statistics for the sample

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Difference	Combined
Gender (Male = 1)	0.51	0.54	-0.03	0.53
Born in the 1960s or earlier	0.24	0.20	0.04	0.22
Born in the 1970s	0.25	0.26	-0.01	0.25
Born in the 1980s	0.30	0.31	-0.01	0.31
Born in the 1990s or later	0.21	0.23	-0.02	0.22
Coastal province	0.54	0.48	0.06	0.51
CPC membership	0.15	0.18	-0.03	0.17
Income	4.63	4.64	-0.01	4.63
College degree and above	0.59	0.62	-0.03	0.61
Christian	0.03	0.05	-0.02	0.04
Han Chinese	0.95	0.92	0.03	0.94
Rural hukou	0.28	0.21	0.07	0.25
Nationalism	0.91	0.90	0.01	0.91
US experience	0.31	0.31	0.00	0.31
Military knowledge	0.29	0.32	-0.03	0.30

All the variables are either binary or scaled between 0 and 1, except for income, which is measured on a seven-point scale. See the online appendix for question wording and variable coding.

As can be seen, all these variables are nearly identical between the two waves.³⁶ Thus, even though the two samples predominantly consisted of different respondents, it is not unreasonable to treat them as comparable.

Consistent with existing studies using online samples in China, our respondents were more highly educated and more likely to reside in coastal and urban areas than the general population. A recent study shows that such samples are representative of the nearly one billion netizens in China.³⁷ In the Chinese context, one could argue that netizens' opinions matter even more for the government than those of the general population.³⁸

In both waves of the survey, we asked nine substantive questions, plus an auxiliary question, which are summarized in [Table 2](#). These questions fall into three categories, probing Chinese citizens' evaluations of (1) China-US bilateral relations; (2) the USA and its role in the world; and (3) China's position in the world vis-à-vis the USA.

Notably, seven of the 10 questions (with asterisks) are replicated from the PGAS in China conducted in Spring 2013 and Spring 2016—i.e., before the Trump administration. Question 1 is similar to a question in the 2010 PGAS (“Do you think relations between China and the USA have improved in recent years, or don't you think so?”) but with a shorter timeframe (“in the past year”), as our two waves of survey were separated by only three months.

Replicating questions from the PGAS makes it possible for us to track potential changes over time in Chinese public opinion, but how comparable are our respondents to those in the PGAS samples? When comparing past and present surveys, we want to ensure that the differences arise from changes in attitudes over time (either gradually or due to some landmark moments) rather than changes in (1) the underlying samples or (2) survey/question design. Using the exact wording in the Pew survey rules out (2), but we cannot completely rule out (1). Our respondents are drawn from an online panel using proportional quota sampling, whereas the PGAS samples are based on face-to-face interviews with a multi-stage, area probability design. Both approaches yield samples with basic demographics (age,

³⁶ Two sample *t*-tests confirm that all of the differences between the two waves are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

³⁷ Xiaojun Li, et al., “The Face of Internet Recruitment: Evaluating the Labor Markets of Online Crowdsourcing Platforms in China,” *Research & Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1–8.

³⁸ Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Table 2. Survey questions

I. Bilateral relationship	1. Over the past year, has the US–China relationship gotten better, worse, or stayed the same? 2*. To what extent does the USA take into account China’s interests in its international policy decisions? 3a*. How much influence is the USA having on China’s economic conditions?
II. USA and its role in the world	3b*. [If answer to 3a is “great deal” or “fair amount”] Is the impact on China’s economic conditions positive or negative? 4*. Compared to 10 years ago, does the USA play a more, less, or as important a role in the world? 5*. How much confidence do you have in a US president to do the right thing regarding world affairs? 6*. Do you think the US government respects the personal freedoms of its people?
III. China’s status in the world vis-à-vis the USA	7*. Which country is the world’s leading economy? 8. Which country is the world’s largest economy? 9. In the future, which would be better for the world: the USA/China being the leading power, both leading, or neither.

gender, etc.) benchmarked against national averages in the census but at the same time are skewed toward urban and higher-income respondents.³⁹ In this sense, these samples are at least comparable on those metrics. Moreover, given how US–China relations have shifted drastically since the most recent PGAS in China in 2016, it is reasonable to expect that any differences in the survey results are much more likely due to changes in bilateral relations than to residual differences in the samples.

The next section reports the main findings from the two-wave survey, grouped by the three categories in Table 2 and contextualized with the respective questions from PGAS, where applicable. The results are presented in three figures.

Findings

Views on the Bilateral Relationship

In our first wave, conducted immediately before the 2020 presidential election, 75% of Chinese respondents believed that the bilateral relationship had worsened in the past year. However, in the second wave, conducted shortly after Biden took office, the percentage seeing a worsening of the relationship dropped to 64%. Correspondingly, those seeing a better relationship increased from 6% in the first wave to 15% in the second wave. The difference between the two waves, separated by just three months, showed a “Biden effect,”⁴⁰ likely influenced by Chinese foreign policy opinion leaders who predicted a less turbulent relationship under the new president and even “breakthroughs in resuming high-level communication and rebuilding mutual strategic trust.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, the overall negative perception of the relationship remained high, in stark contrast to the PGAS finding in 2010, a year before the USA announced its “Pivot to Asia,”⁴² where the majority (73%)

³⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/international-survey-research/international-methodology/all-survey/all-country/all-year>.

⁴⁰ Because the margin of error for both waves is $\pm 3\%$, as a simple rule of thumb, a difference of 6% or more between the same responses from the two waves can be deemed “statistically significant.”

⁴¹ “Biden Wins: What’s Next for China-US Relations?” *Global Times*, 8 November 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1206038.shtml>.

⁴² Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

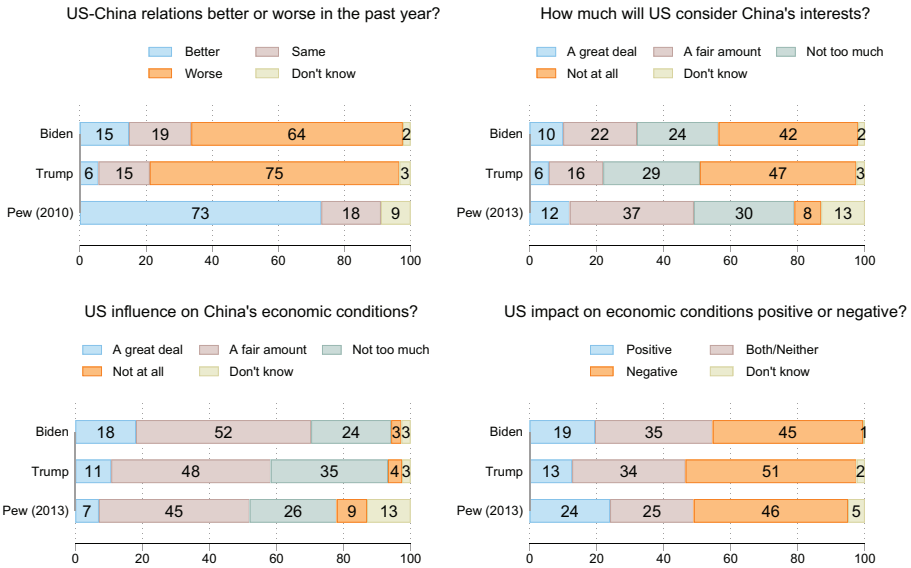


Fig. 1. Views on the bilateral relationship

Note: Percentage points may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Source: Authors' survey.

of the respondents had seen “improved” bilateral relations and only 18% regarded the relationship to have either remained the same or gotten worse.⁴³

On the question of whether the USA would take China’s interests into consideration when making its foreign policies, in our first wave, 76% of the respondents selected either “not at all” or “not too much,” with the “not at all” response at 47%. In the second wave, 68% selected the negative options, with 42% reporting “not at all.” Again, this showed a small but statistically significant improvement in public perception when Biden took office, but it still represented a 30% increase in negative response compared with the results from the 2013 PGAS, which saw 38% total negative answers and only 8% choosing the “not at all” response. This worsening of perception from a baseline of rather strong goodwill is extraordinary.

The extensive trade relations between the USA and China have long been regarded as the bedrock of stable US–China relations.⁴⁴ The US–China trade war initiated by President Trump in 2018 worried many Chinese analysts by removing the main anchor for the bilateral relationship, in addition to its direct damage to the Chinese economy. In both the 2013 PGAS and our survey, the majority of Chinese respondents agreed that the USA had a “fair amount” or “great deal” of influence over the Chinese economy. The number increased from 52% in the 2013 PGAS to 59% in the 2020 wave and further jumped to 70% in the 2021 wave.⁴⁵ The jump in the second wave is surprising, perhaps reflecting an

⁴³ The 2010 PGAS had only two options for this question: “improved” and “not improved,” the latter presumably including respondents who believed the relationship had remained the same or become worse.

⁴⁴ Xinhua News, “China’s Position on the China-US Economic and Trade Consultations,” 3 June, 2020, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/03/WS5cf47231a3104842260bf165.html>.

⁴⁵ In the 2013 PGAS, only 35% of Chinese respondents believed that the US had little or no influence on the Chinese economy.

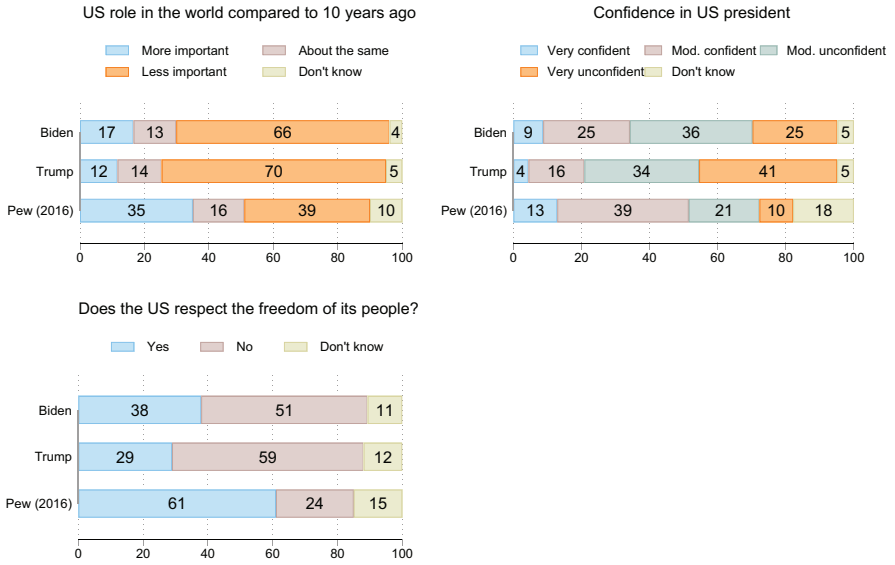


Fig. 2. Views of the USA and its role in the world

Note: Percentage points may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Source: Authors' survey.

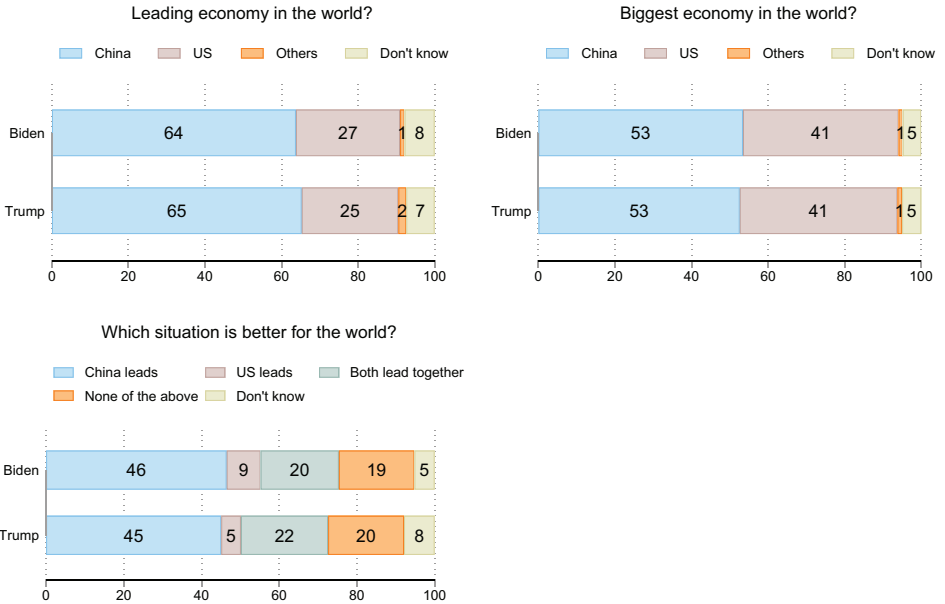


Fig. 3. Views of China's status in the world vis-à-vis the USA

Note: Percentage points may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Source: Authors' survey.

optimism, even wishful thinking, that the volatile trade relations under Trump would come to an end with the arrival of the Biden administration and that bilateral trade would increase again.

Among those who answered affirmatively about US influence on the Chinese economy, a small proportion (13%) in our first wave saw the impact to be positive, while nearly four times indicated negative (51%). This large spread is indicative of the well-publicized damaging effects of Trump's trade war on the Chinese economy.⁴⁶ These numbers improved in the second wave, when 19% and 45% of the respondents believed the impact to be positive and negative, respectively, although the positive responses still fell behind those from the 2013 PGAS, when the same question was asked under Obama.

In sum, the Chinese public perception of the bilateral relationship has deteriorated dramatically since 2010, a high point when 76% believed that the relationship had improved in the past years; by early 2021, public perception had done almost a one-eighty, with 64% saying the opposite. Consistent with this result, we found that the proportion of respondents who believed the USA would never take into account China's interests ballooned by more than 30% from 2013. These results are expected, given the acrimonious relationship between the two countries under the Trump administration. A more interesting finding is that a higher proportion of Chinese respondents believed the USA had influence over the Chinese economy under both Trump and Biden than under Obama. This is likely due to Trump's trade war, which increased the Chinese public's awareness of the interconnectedness of the two countries' economies. Finally, there is a robust "Biden effect" in the responses to all three questions—more positive or optimistic views were expressed about the bilateral relations after the 2020 presidential election than before it.

Views of the USA and Its Role in the World

In Spring 2016, the PGAS found that nearly four out of 10 (39%) Chinese respondents believed the USA was playing a less important leadership role in the world, while slightly fewer (35%) thought the opposite (35%). Using the same question, we found in late 2020 and early 2021 that the gaps between the two opposing views had widened substantially, with 70% and 66% of the respondents in the two waves of the survey saying the leadership role of the USA had declined. Although Trump's high-profile withdrawals from several international agreements and bodies—including pulling out of the Paris Agreement, ending the Iran nuclear deal, and terminating America's WHO membership—have certainly contributed to the shift of opinions, the view did not improve even after Biden took office, suggesting some other factors may be at play.

The next two questions attempted to tease out the appeal of the US global leadership and America's domestic political system, which could help shed light on the reasons behind the decline in the perception of the US leadership. Whereas 52% of Chinese respondents in the Spring 2016 PGAS survey had confidence in President Obama to do the right thing in world affairs, in our two waves of survey before and after the recent US presidential election, 20% and 34% expressed the same sentiment about Trump and Biden, respectively. The Biden effect was apparent, but there was still a nearly 20% difference from the 2016 response. In addition to having less confidence in a US president's handling of world affairs, only 29% and 38% of respondents in the two waves of our survey believed the US government respected the freedom of its own people. Once again, opinions changed for the better after Biden took office, but they remained a far cry from the 61% positive response in the 2016 PGAS survey.

⁴⁶ Analysts believe that the impact of the trade war on the Chinese economy is "pretty major," as Chinese exports to the US dropped 12% in 2019, and total industrial output growth in the year also fell to its lowest level in 17 years. See Reuters, "China Says It Needs 'Arduous Efforts' to Meet 2019 Industrial Output Goal," 23 July, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/23/china-economy-arduous-efforts-to-meet-2019-industrial-output-goal.html>. Also Tanner Brown, "China Exports to US Fall as Trade War Bites," *MarketWatch*, 5 October 2019, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/china-exports-to-us-fall-as-trade-war-bites-2019-10-05>.

In sum, compared with 2016, there has been a significant increase in the belief among Chinese citizens that the USA is playing a less important role in the world, and correspondingly, a steep drop in confidence that a US president would handle world affairs appropriately. Moreover, the low proportion of respondents who believed the US government respected its own people hinted at scepticism about the gap between reality and ideal. While the Chinese respondents might not have had the same understanding of “freedom” as Americans do,⁴⁷ the concept has been central to the appeal of American democracy over Chinese authoritarianism. In 2020, the world witnessed the protests against police brutality and racism in the USA after the murder of George Floyd, as well as the US government’s poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis, which resulted in the world’s largest number of reported deaths. These events revealed challenges in US domestic politics and governance that went beyond a particular administration and likely surprised or even shocked many of the Chinese respondents.⁴⁸

Views of China’s Status in the World Vis-à-vis the USA

We now turn to the Chinese public’s evaluations of China’s position in the world vis-à-vis the USA. Chinese citizens have become much more confident about their country’s economic status since 2016. In the late 2020 survey wave, 65% of the respondents saw their country as the “world’s leading economy,”⁴⁹ and 64% of respondents in the second wave in early 2021 concurred. The PGAS asked the same question annually between 2013 and 2016, and the perception of the Chinese public during those years was steady: around 29% consistently thought China was the leading economy, while around 45% consistently thought the USA was. There was a roughly 35% increase in the perception that China was the leading economy, while those who chose the USA dropped by more than 20%. Correspondingly, compared with 2016, the percentage who chose a third country or “don’t know” shrank significantly.

In addition to replicating the PGAS’s “leading economy” question, we asked a new question about which country is the “world’s largest economy,”⁵⁰ commonly measured by gross domestic product (GDP). Since GDP is a concept more unambiguously measurable than “leading economy,” this question explores to what extent the respondents were aware that the USA remains the largest economy based on this metric.⁵¹ We found that 53% of the respondents—the same in both waves—thought China is now the world’s largest economy. The proportion of those who believed China was the leading economy was about 10% larger than those who believed China was the largest economy, suggesting that even some of those who were aware that China was not the largest economy still believed their country was already playing a leading role in the world economy. Perhaps the widely reported strong recovery of the Chinese economy from the COVID-19 pandemic to become the only major economy that grew in 2020 further contributed to such a perception.⁵²

Our final question addressed a key policy-relevant matter: the Chinese public’s willingness to see their country as leading the world. In our first wave, 45% of the respondents chose China as the leading power, and another 22% chose China and the USA leading together. In total, over two-thirds of the Chinese believed China was ready to lead the

⁴⁷ Peng Hu, “Popular Understanding of Democracy in Contemporary China,” *Democratization*, Vol. 25, No. 8 (2018), pp. 1441–59.

⁴⁸ Zhaoyin Feng, “George Floyd Death: China Takes a Victory Lap over US Protests,” *BBC News*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52912241>.

⁴⁹ This is translated from “引领世界经济” in Chinese.

⁵⁰ This is translated from “世界最大经济体” in Chinese.

⁵¹ China is the largest economy on a purchasing power parity basis, a much less commonly used metric.

⁵² Jonathan Cheng, “China Is the Only Major Economy to Report Economic Growth for 2020,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 January 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-only-major-economy-to-report-economic-growth-for-2020-11610936187>.

world, at least jointly with the USA. This pattern held for the second wave, with 46% choosing a Chinese leadership and 20% a China–US joint leadership.

In sum, almost two-thirds of the Chinese public believed their country to be the world's leading economy, and just over half believed it to be the largest economy, even though in reality, that spot is still occupied by the USA. Well over 40% also believed the world would be better off with China as the leading power, but one-fifth of our respondents chose both countries leading the world as the best scenario. This offers an interesting contrast to the American public's response to the same question in the spring 2020 PGAS survey, which found that 91% of Americans preferred the USA to be the world's leading power, and 0% chose both countries leading together.⁵³ Finally, unlike in the previous two sections, there was no “Biden effect” in this section, as responses to all three questions were nearly identical across the two waves.

Effects of Individual Attributes on Attitudes

How did respondents' individual attributes influence their views? In this section, we present results from our analysis of four attributes that we found most interesting to examine in the context of the Chinese public: age cohort (born in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s and later),⁵⁴ education (with or without college degree), nationalism, and ties to the USA. The inclusion of the first three should be intuitive, and they allow us to compare our results with those from existing studies on Chinese public opinion.⁵⁵ We added “ties to the US” as a fourth factor to examine whether more direct and individualized experiences with the USA led to systematically different attitudes among our respondents. The idea is based on contact theory, which has received attention in recent studies of Chinese perceptions of foreign countries.⁵⁶

We estimated a series of logistic regressions for every question in the survey, controlling for all the socioeconomic characteristics in [Table 1](#). Below, we elaborate on how these attributes help predict respondents' evaluations of the bilateral relations, confidence in the US president, and views of China's position in the world vis-à-vis the USA. [Figure 4](#) report average marginal effects of the four attributes, which are calculated as the average of changes in predicted probabilities for one unit of change in the attribute of interest, using estimates from the logistic regression models. Results from the full analyses can be found in the online appendix.

Age

A recent study found that younger Chinese tend to hold more favorable views of the USA.⁵⁷ Our findings point to the opposite. Many of the respondents in the youngest cohort came of age during the Trump administration, which likely contributed to their more negative views of the USA. Specifically, on the evaluation of bilateral relations, compared to those born in the 1960s and earlier, those born in the 1990s and later (the “post-90ers”) were about 9%

⁵³ Laura Silver, et al., “U.S. Views of China Increasingly Negative Amid Coronavirus Outbreak,” *Pew Research Center*, 21 April 2020,

https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/PG_2020.04.21_U.S.-Views-China_FINAL.pdf.

⁵⁴ Respondents born in the 1960s or earlier are the reference category.

⁵⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2017), pp. 7–43; Donghui Wang, et al., “In the Eyes of the Beholder: How China and the U.S. See Each Other,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (5 July 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1945737>; Xiaojun Li, et al., “Chinese Citizens' Trust in Japan and South Korea: Findings from a Four-City Survey,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2016), pp. 778–89.

⁵⁶ Wang, et al., “In the Eyes of the Beholder”; Dong Wang, et al., “The Effect of Imagined Social Contact on Chinese Students' Perceptions of Japanese People,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (2021), pp. 223–51.

⁵⁷ Wang, et al., “In the Eyes of the Beholder.”

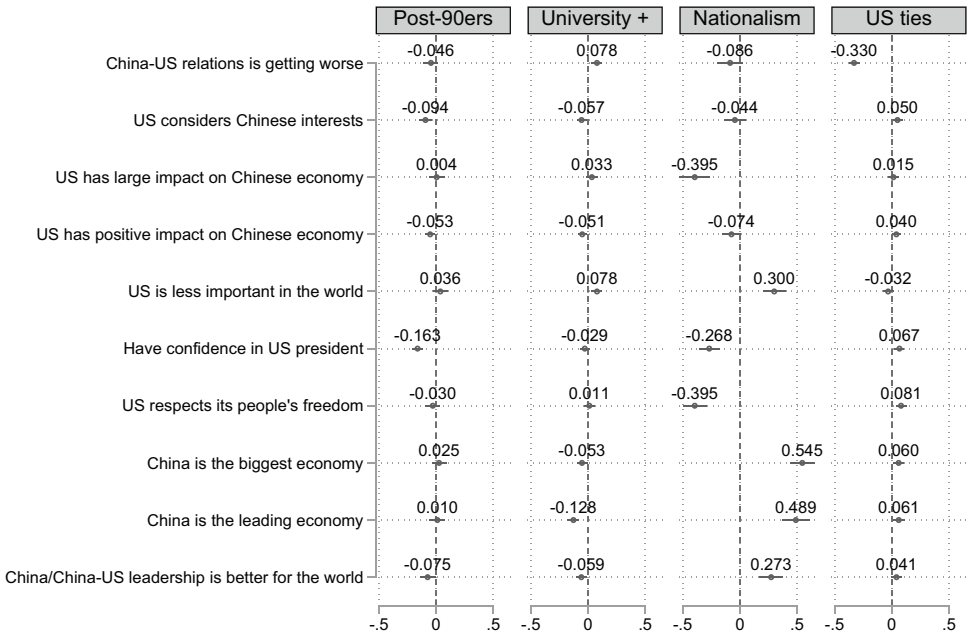


Fig. 4. Effects of individual attributes on attitudes

Note: The dots are average marginal effects and the bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Full estimation results available in the online appendix. Source: Authors' survey.

less likely to say that the USA cares about China's interests when making foreign policies and 5% less likely to say that the USA has a positive influence on the Chinese economy. Moreover, compared to the oldest cohort, the post-90ers were 16% less likely to report confidence in the US president.

Similar to the post-90ers, the post-80ers—i.e., those born in the 1980s—were 6% less confident in the US president than respondents in the oldest age cohort. However, a finding unique to this group is that they were 9% and 10% more likely to consider China the world's leading and largest economy, respectively. One plausible explanation for this heightened national pride is that these respondents were the first to experience China's Patriotic Education Campaign during their formative years, an initiative designed to "boost the nation's spirit, enhance its cohesion, foster its self-esteem and sense of pride;"⁵⁸ at the same time, they had not been as exposed to the outside world as the post-90ers, born in the age of the Internet.

Education

Next, we examine educational background. When evaluating the bilateral relationship, respondents with college degrees were 8% more likely to say the relationship had deteriorated, 6% less likely to say the USA considered Chinese interests, and 5% less likely to say the USA had a positive influence on the Chinese economy. When evaluating America's role in the world, college graduates were 8% more likely to say the USA was playing a less important role in the world.

⁵⁸ Suisheng Zhao, "A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1998), p. 293.

Not surprisingly, higher education is associated with more realistic understandings of China's economy. College graduates were 13% and 5% less likely to say the Chinese economy was the world's largest and leading economy, respectively. Consistent with this assessment, the more educated seemed less sanguine about the idea of Chinese global leadership, being 6% less likely to endorse Chinese or China–US joint leadership. In other words, this group were more subdued about Chinese global leadership, likely due to a sense that China is not yet ready for the role, a view shared by many international relation scholars in China.⁵⁹

Nationalism

Following existing studies,⁶⁰ we constructed a normalized measure of nationalism based on respondents' answers to five standard questions designed to tap nationalistic sentiments.⁶¹ Overall, the findings here are consistent with conventional wisdom, and the substantive effects are large. On questions regarding America's role in the world, compared to the least nationalistic respondents (those who scored 0 on the nationalism measure), nationalists (scoring 1 on the nationalism measure) were 30% more likely to think America's role in the world had declined, 27% were less likely to have confidence in the US president to do the right thing for world affairs, and 40% were less likely to say that the USA respected the freedom of its own people.

Nationalists also took pride in China's economic success and endorsed China playing a leadership role internationally. Specifically, the nationalists were about 49% more likely to believe that the Chinese economy was the largest in the world and 55% more likely to say that China was the world's leading economy. They were also 40% less likely to say that the USA had a large or fair amount of influence on the Chinese economy. Finally, the nationalists were about 28% more likely to favor Chinese or China–US joint global leadership. Taken together, nationalistic individuals were far less positive about the USA and more confident in their own country.

Ties to the US

Finally, we examine whether those who had closer connections with and personal experiences in the USA displayed more positive attitudes toward the USA. The idea is based on intergroup contact theory,⁶² which posits that personal connections and experiences can provide an individual with a more nuanced and informed understanding of an outgroup than the mainstream narrative. To test this possibility, we identified those in the sample who had visited or studied in the USA, or who had close relatives (parents or children) working and/or studying in the USA.

There is evidence that personal connections and experiences do matter in mitigating negative views of the USA.⁶³ In our survey, respondents with close US contacts or personal experiences through work or study were 7% more likely to report confidence in the US president and 7% more likely to say the US government respected the freedom of the American people. Furthermore, these respondents were 5% more likely to believe the USA would

⁵⁹ Feng, et al., *How China Sees the World*.

⁶⁰ E.g., Johnston, "Is Chinese Nationalism Rising?"; Jessica Chen Weiss, "How Hawkish is the Chinese Public? Another Look at 'Rising Nationalism' and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 119 (2019), 679–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1580427>.

⁶¹ We provide the questions and coding scheme in the online appendix.

⁶² Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Intergroup Contact Theory," *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1998), pp. 65–85.

⁶³ A recent survey by the Eurasia Group Foundation similarly found that Chinese citizens who, "in the past five years, have either traveled to the United States or have a friend or family member living there are significantly more likely to have a positive opinion of the US." Mark Hannah and Caroline Gray, "Democracy in Disarray: How the World Sees the U.S. and Its Example," Eurasia Group Foundation, May 2021, <http://egfound.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Modeling-Democracy.pdf>, p. 8.

pay attention to China's interests when conducting its foreign policies and 4% more likely to say the US impact on Chinese economic conditions was positive. Respondents with US ties were also about 5% more likely to say that China was the world's leading and largest economy. These findings suggest that some of the Chinese public have positive views of both the USA and China.

Interestingly, the post-90ers were also more likely to have US experiences (about 16% more likely than the other age groups in the survey). Recall that this group as a whole held a more negative view about the USA. These two patterns are not contradictory; rather, it means that among the post-90ers, those with US experiences held more positive views of the USA than those without such experiences. For example, the post-90ers as a group were, on average, less likely to express confidence in the US president; however, those with US experiences were about 10% more likely to express confidence in the US president compared with the rest in that group.

Gaps between Public Perceptions and State Rhetoric

Earlier in the discussion of Chinese public opinion and foreign policy, we referred to the question of whether the Chinese public can develop opinions unfiltered by state propaganda. We argued that the propaganda effect is not perfect. This can be corroborated by findings from our survey, as well as their comparisons with others' studies; together, they show that changes in Chinese public opinion have often diverged from official narratives and were likely spontaneous reactions to external events and shocks. We discuss such gaps in Chinese public opinion and state rhetoric in this section.

Since President Trump initiated a trade war against China in March 2018, tensions between the two governments began to escalate, reflected not only in the tariffs they levied on each other but also in government rhetoric.⁶⁴ Yet, when the Eurasia Group probed Chinese opinions on the USA in October 2019, only 17% of the respondents reported having explicitly unfavourable feelings towards the USA. This number more than quadrupled within a year. We specifically included in our survey a question asking Chinese respondents to express their feelings about a range of developed nations, including the USA, close US allies such as Australia and the UK, and many continental European countries.⁶⁵ Seventy-seven percent of Chinese respondents expressed an unfavourable view of the USA. It is difficult to attribute this drastic deterioration in Chinese perceptions entirely to propaganda work. More likely, Trump's rhetoric and policies toward China in 2020 had a much bigger role than propaganda in the worsening of Chinese perceptions.

The gaps between public perceptions and state rhetoric are also evident in how other countries were viewed. For example, negative feeling toward Australia was 30% less than toward the USA, despite the rapid deterioration of official relations between China and Australia around the time of our survey due to a range of contentious issues between the two countries.⁶⁶ Similarly, negativity toward Britain was 31% less than toward the USA, even though Beijing had been criticizing the British government for almost two years for its support of the Hong Kong protests. Moreover, there was a wide range of variation in the Chinese public's attitudes toward the continental European countries

⁶⁴ Ana Swanson, "U.S. and China Expand Trade War as Beijing Matches Trump's Tariffs," *The New York Times*, 15 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/us/politics/us-china-tariffs-trade.html>; Lily Kuo, "'The Fool Builds Walls': China Takes Aim at Trump Trade War Threats," *The Guardian*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/18/china-trump-trade-war-threats-the-fool-builds-walls-media>.

⁶⁵ Adam Y. Liu, et al., "What Do Chinese People Think of Developed Countries?" *The Diplomat*, 18 December 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/what-do-chinese-people-think-of-developed-countries/>.

⁶⁶ Natasha Kassam, "Great Expectations: The Unraveling of the Australia-China Relationship," The Brookings Institution, 20 June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/great-expectations-the-unraveling-of-the-australia-china-relationship/>.

that did not necessarily reflect how the respective bilateral relations were reported in China.⁶⁷

Additionally, there is a broad consensus among China watchers in the USA that Chinese leaders and intellectual elites believed the USA to be in decline in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and that this view has influenced China's policy toward the USA.⁶⁸ If this is indeed the case, then a comparison of our survey results and those from the PGAS suggests that the Chinese public did not share this assessment of the USA as late as 2016. By the time of our 2020 survey, those who viewed the US role in the world as less important had increased dramatically, from 39% to 70%; in the same period, those who were not confident in the US president had also increased from 10% to 41%. The results again suggest that the attitudes of the Chinese public may not closely track official or elite opinions.

Finally, as we analysed above, there are interesting variations in public attitudes that are associated with respondents' personal attributes. Most importantly, different age cohorts had different attitudes, with the youngest generation (the post-90ers) having more negative attitudes toward the USA. In addition, personal contact (travel, study, close family living in the USA) led to more positive views of the USA. These findings suggest that in the presence of the same propaganda, different individuals may develop different attitudes.⁶⁹

Conclusion

When Ronald Reagan visited China in 1984, he told Chinese college students that “friendship between people is the basis of friendship between governments.”⁷⁰ Today, increasing rivalry between the two countries has significantly weakened, if not eliminated, that basis in China–US relations. While numerous public opinion polls conducted in the USA have shown deteriorating American public opinion of China, our two surveys are the first to reveal that a similar trend has been developing in Chinese public opinion toward the USA. Trump's trade war and hostile rhetoric toward China, combined with Chinese observations of mass protests against systemic racism in the USA as well as the 6 January 2021 Capitol riot, have likely prompted the Chinese public to re-evaluate the state of the bilateral relationship, China's status in the world vis-à-vis the USA, and the USA as a country.

Our survey reveals a number of broad trends. First, there has been a significant decline in positive views of the USA from a baseline of rather strong goodwill prior to 2016, following drastic deterioration in the China–US relationship during the Trump presidency. Second, the public perceives the USA to be in decline and playing a less important role in the world, while China is perceived to be in a stronger economic position vis-à-vis the USA and poised to play a greater leadership role internationally, either by itself or alongside the USA. Finally, while Chinese respondents' evaluations of the bilateral relationship and of the USA evinced

⁶⁷ Adam Y. Liu, et al., “What Do Chinese People Think of Developed Countries?”

⁶⁸ Jude Blanchette, “Beijing's Vision of American Decline,” *Politico*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2021/03/11/beijings-visions-of-american-decline-492064>.

⁶⁹ A recent study similarly challenges the common assumption that China's growing power has fostered a generation of youths with unanimous support for more assertive Chinese foreign policy. See Qin Pang, et al., “China's Growing Power Makes Its Youth Hawkish? Evidence from the Chinese Youth's Attitudes toward the US and Japan,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (26 December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.2010881>.

⁷⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at Fudan University in Shanghai, China,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries and Museum, 30 April 1984, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-fudan-university-shanghai-china>.

a “Biden bump,”⁷¹ their confidence in China’s strength and its place in the world remained consistent across the two waves of the survey.

There are also more nuanced findings that cut against common assumptions about the attitudes of the younger generation and the effects of overseas experiences on public attitudes. First, we find that the youngest generation in our sample, i.e., the post-90ers, held more negative views of the USA on average than the older generations, in contrast to findings from a survey conducted in 2015.⁷² This difference highlights the dynamic nature of public opinion, where the definition of “young people” changes every few years. Second, those who had ties to the USA through personal contacts or experiences had more positive views about the country, and this result held even among the post-90ers. Interestingly, those who had ties to the USA were also slightly more likely to believe that China was the leading and largest economy in the world. In other words, positive views of the two countries were not mutually exclusive, suggesting that personal experiences with the USA can produce more positive feelings toward the country without undermining pride in one’s own country.

These results have important policy implications. In particular, direct or indirect experiences of the USA through travelling, studying, or working there do seem to promote goodwill toward the country, lending support for policies that promote the cross-border flow of people. Moreover, as the post-90ers enter into leadership roles in Chinese society over the coming decades, their views of the world and China–US relations will influence numerous policy areas. Therefore, intensifying competition between the two most powerful countries today will have a long-lasting effect not just through the policies adopted but also by influencing the world views of the future generations of policymakers.

The patterns revealed in our study are unlikely to change in a short period, although public opinion everywhere can be fluid. Already, the Spring 2021 PGAS shows that public perceptions in advanced economies have turned more positive toward the USA since President Biden took office.⁷³ However, a consensus seems to be emerging—both inside and outside China—that Biden has largely continued Trump’s China policy, albeit with a key difference in strategy: instead of going it alone, Biden has tried to build a broader coalition to counter China’s rise.⁷⁴ Correspondingly, while the Chinese public and analysts had initially anticipated (or hoped for) a more moderate China policy from the Biden administration, that expectation has since been revised, suggesting the “Biden bump” we found in the second wave may dissipate over time. Future research can ascertain whether or not this is indeed the case.

⁷¹ The “Biden bump” was also observed in most other countries, with opinions of the US rebounding in Spring 2021. See Laura Silver, “China’s International Image Remains Broadly Negative as Views of the U.S. Rebound,” *Pew Research Center*, 30 June 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/30/chinas-international-image-remains-broadly-negative-as-views-of-the-u-s-rebound/>.

⁷² Wang et al., “In the Eyes of the Beholder.”

⁷³ See <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/01/what-people-around-the-world-like-and-dislike-about-american-society-and-politics/>.

⁷⁴ Alex Leary and Bob Davis, “Biden’s China Policy Is Emerging—and It Looks a Lot Like Trump’s,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-china-policy-is-emerging-and-it-looks-a-lot-like-trumps-11623330000>. Also see Elise Labott, “When the White House Changed Hands, It Changed Tone but Not Policies,” *Financial Post*, 22 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/22/biden-us-policy-trump-legacy-foreign-policy-aucus/>; Asma Khalid, “Biden Is Keeping Key Parts of Trump’s China Trade Policy. Here’s Why,” *NPR*, 4 October 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/04/1043027789/biden-is-keeping-key-parts-of-trumps-china-trade-policy-heres-why>; Global Times, “Biden Extends Trump’s China Policy, More Predictable Yet More Chill: Global Times Editorial,” 28 April, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1222394.shtml>.

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