

# Interests, Values, and Geopolitics: The Global Public Opinion on China

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The essay discusses the public opinion surveys on the rise of China in the United States, Asia and Latin America since 2010, conducted by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Duke University's collaborative research team headed by the author. It examines the world public recognition of China's growing influence, their attitudes toward China's influence, and reactions to the 'China Model' and impressions of China's political, economic, social, and cultural development. These assessments of China's domestic issues or internal behavior show not only the amount of information and knowledge that the people in various countries know about China, but the intrinsic value judgments and ideological biases that influence their perceptions of China. The essay argues that the rise of China is a complicated phenomenon with a multifarious nature, including material dimensions, such as military power, economic development, and technological innovation, as well as ideational dimensions, such as perception, understanding, or prejudice. Public opinion, attitudes and perceptions of China's rise are the outcome of dynamic interactions and assemblage of factors, a synergy of material interests, ideational and emotional reactions, and values, ideologies, principles, unraveling themselves against a highly volatile, precarious and contentious geopolitical backdrop, in which the interests of nation-states and individuals became all intertwined and inseparable.

In December 2009 I was asked by the *New York Times* correspondent on how China is viewed by the Westerners. I said, 'China is like an adolescent who took too many steroids. It has suddenly become big, but it finds it hard to coordinate and control its body. To the West, it can look like a monster.'<sup>1</sup> It then became the newspaper's quote of the day, and for weeks my email account was inundated by comments and inquiries for elaboration on the metaphor or image that I invoked. Now nearly five years have passed, does that image still describe China well? Or is it true that only Westerners still harbor a lingering monster image of China, a stereotypical impression perpetuated by Western media? How about China's Asian neighbors and Latin Americans who are far away from China? And, all in all, if that is merely a Western media-constructed image, what is the view of general public across the world on China today?

My metaphor suggests that China's rapid rise has caught the world by surprise, partly because of its scale and speed, and partly because of its own behavior. China's economic growth and political stalemate, its sporadic upsurges of nationalist fervor and moral depravation and emptiness, its sometimes low-key, non-interventionist diplomacy and sometimes bellicose gestures in dealing with its neighboring countries, are sharply contradictory. For a country slated to become a leading world power, the high degree of uncertainty and volatility of its actions cannot but arouse anxiety and weariness across the world. Since the 2008 world economic crisis, the precipitous decline of influence of the United States and the EU in world affairs has been underscored by the undaunted ascendance of China into the second largest economy, and, unsurprisingly, by its global influence. China's behavior, which is now being closely scrutinized by the world, nonetheless sends the world mixed, inconsistent signals. Hence, some observers, such as Ian Bremmer who runs Eurasia Group, a leading global political risk think tank, would draw a conclusion that China's global influence is rather limited: 'although China's economic influence is growing, its power to influence other nations is slight. It has achieved little of what policymakers call "capture," a condition in which economic or security dependence of one country on another allows the more powerful to drive the other's policy making.' And in terms of 'soft power' influence, Bremmer continues, 'China's political and economic systems have little appeal in other countries. Its state capitalist economic model attracts political leaders looking to build wealth and micromanage markets, but it offers little for ordinary citizens.'<sup>2</sup>

The appeal to ordinary citizens worldwide now indeed becomes critical in a media-driven world, where policymakers, government officials, business leaders, and other social elites must take into account what people think and want not only in domestic issues but also in international affairs. Chinese leadership since the reform and opening up has already recognized the need to change the Soviet-style, unilateral *waixuan* or 'external (international) propaganda' model derived from the cold war era, and since 2007 the Chinese government has stepped up efforts to build 'cultural soft power' across the world, and promoted 'public diplomacy' as an important part of its foreign policy implementations. Moreover, in the age of the internet and social media, public opinion has inevitably affected policies and deals in trade relations, geopolitical negotiations, and other international affairs. It is a changed landscape now, an arena where the otherwise 'silent majority' who would find little room to express their views, let alone exert any influence in the past, is making their voices heard.

Measuring the perception and attitudes of the world public toward China has gained new momentum in recent years. Public opinion survey organizations such as Pew Research Center, Committee of 100, Chicago Council on Global Affairs' 2010 public opinion survey, BBC World Service and GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, Japan Public Opinion Research Institute Corporation and *China Daily*, etc., have conducted public opinion surveys on attitudes toward or perceptions of China in the United States and worldwide.<sup>3</sup> The Surveys of the US-based think tanks, Pew and

Committee of 100, polls public opinion in both the US and China, focusing primarily on US–China relations. The Committee of 100 Chairman, Dominic Ng, observes that ‘the 2012 Opinion Survey bears timely relevance with US–China relations as a pivotal issue in this year’s US presidential and congressional elections and China’s political leadership transition. The key findings of this year’s survey underscore the United States and China as strategic stakeholders. Pragmatic partnership between Washington and Beijing requires bilateral trust-building based on common ground and mutual benefits’.<sup>4</sup> The Pew and BBC surveys poll the public opinion of various countries on China, aiming at a comprehensive assessment of the overall impressions of China’s rise vis-à-vis the United States. The 2013 Pew Global Attitude Survey states that:

publics around the world believe the global balance of power is shifting. China’s economic power is on the rise, and many think it will eventually supplant the United States as the world’s dominant superpower. However, China’s increasing power has not led to more positive ratings for the People’s Republic. Overall, the US enjoys a stronger global image than China. Across the nations surveyed, a median of 63% express a favorable opinion of the US, compared with 50% for China.<sup>5</sup>

Until 2009 none of the China-related surveys had been organized by Chinese research institutions. In 2009, Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s Institute of Arts and Humanities for the first time inaugurated a China-based National Image Survey Project, in collaboration with Duke University and Indiana University. In the summer of 2010 my Duke colleagues Tianjian Shi and John Aldrich, and myself (holding appointments both at Duke and Shanghai Jiao Tong University) designed the core questionnaires for the survey. We began the US Attitude toward China survey in the summer of 2010, through the Indiana University Survey Research Center. In 2011, collaboration began with Asian Barometer with a battery of seven questions on China included in its Third Wave surveys of 12 Asian countries and regions, including Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and China itself. Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s project plan was to conduct global surveys of the image of China in collaboration with Global Barometers Surveys (GBS), a consortium of continent-based survey organizations such as Asian Barometer, Afrobarometer, Eurasian Barometer, and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP of Vanderbilt University). The Asian survey data were completed in 2012. By 2013, the survey of 26 Latin American countries on the perception of China, using a battery of questions similar to that of the ABS survey, was completed, and the data of the public opinion survey of India on the rise of China were also collected.

The design of the seven-item battery in the National Image Project can be summarized into four elements: whether China has risen now or will rise in the near future, whether China’s rise is positive to the region, whether the result of China’s rise makes people think China’s developmental model is appealing, and what people think of their bilateral relationship with China. These questions are evaluative in nature, but at the same time, respondents could be very subjective and that makes the questions become thermometer-like measures, reflecting the attitudes instead of

objective evaluations. The rise of China is a complicated phenomenon with a multi-farious nature, including material dimensions, such as military power, economic development, and technological innovation, as well as ideational dimensions, such as perception, understanding, or prejudice. Therefore, our analytical goal is to find out what would be the cognitively factual status for the rise of China, and this result reflects the overall synthetic attitude that is shaped by a plethora of factors in material and ideational dimensions.

Apart from policy implications for China's soft power initiatives and China's diplomacy and global strategies, we hope our surveys will help foster understanding of China's behavior as well as understanding of the world's views of China. China must now act under the spotlight and its every single movement is subject to the most scrupulous examination, which in turn can enhance its self-awareness and caution, or, inversely, can trigger over-reaction if China sees itself in a distorted mirror or a *camera obscura*, which shows its image upside down. In a world of internet media, China appears in a plurality and multiplicity of images, and these images, impressions and subjective feelings and attitudes have become more influential on the ways that countries deal with each other. Today, for understanding global issues, public opinion research ought to receive the greater attention that the long-standing disputes amongst liberal, realist, or constructivist approaches in international relations tend to sidestep.

Some US scholars have acknowledged the growing importance of public opinion in international relations studies, despite the long suspicion of the realist schools of the weight of public opinion in foreign policies.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that in China in recent years a cohort of international relations scholars have tended to adopt a rather hawkish kind of 'realist' stance, claiming that only 'core interests' are China's foreign policy pillars. To them, public opinion is negligible, just as values, principles and ideologies would give in to pragmatic considerations in making deals with other countries. China's growing economic and military might spawns crusaders of such a kind of *realpolitik*.<sup>7</sup> What we would like to seek, by contrast, is a rational, pluralist and syncretic approach that recognizes the growing weight of world citizens' views and voices in global affairs and on China's global role in particular. Before we designed the survey questionnaires, we studied other existing surveys on China. However methodologically rigorous, these surveys invariably focus on what the respondents think about China vis-à-vis the US and other major powers, China's relationship to the respondents' own countries and other relevant countries or regions, and how they arrive at such impressions – their social status, political views, media exposure, etc. While our surveys ask similar questions, we emphasize why people form their impressions and attitudes. In other words, we'd like to probe into issues of value and ideology, and other cultural, historical factors, including stereotypes, biases, and long-standing impressions.

In what follows, I shall discuss the findings of the US, Asian and Latin American surveys, and identify and explore several important patterns and issues, following the chronology of the completion of the surveys, starting from the US (2010 and 2012), Asian (2012) and then Latin American (2012) surveys. First of all, I look at the public

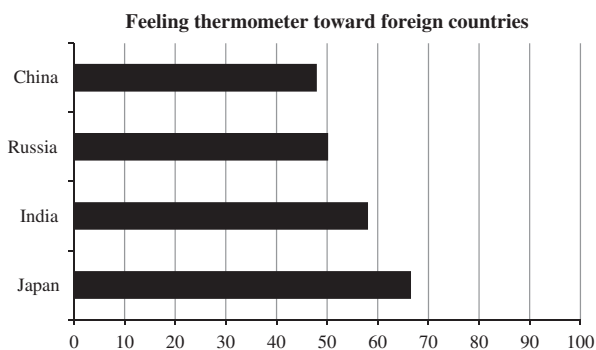
recognition of China's growing influence. How do people in different countries understand China's rise? Second, what are their attitudes toward China's influence – positive or negative? What are the factors that help shape their evaluations of China's influence? And thirdly, what are their reactions to the 'China Model' and what are their impressions of China's political, economic, social, and cultural development. These assessments of China's domestic issues or internal behavior show not only the amount of information and knowledge that the people in various countries know about China, but the intrinsic value judgments and ideological biases that influence their perceptions of China.

### **The American Views of China's Rise**

The US–China relationship has become arguably one of the most important bilateral relationships in today's world. China holds more American debt than any other country, is America's second largest trade partner, and is commonly decried (whether correctly or not) by political elites in public as the leading exemplar of a nation 'taking' American jobs. China is the subject of many features in American media – a multi-episode series on *Wild China* on the National Geographic cable channel, recurring sequences on CBS TV's *60 Minutes*, and so on. Politically, both Republican and Democratic parties and their candidates frequently 'play the China card' on the campaign trail. Both Obama and Romney did so in their 2012 presidential campaigns, although with varying emphasis. As Trey Hardin, a Republican political strategist, argued, the China card played by Obama and Romney brought about the most influential emotion motivating voters in the fall of 2012 – fear. Hardin emphasized that: 'It is not clear that most voters truly understand the economic significance of China but playing the fear card does not necessarily require that tutorial by either campaign.'<sup>8</sup>

However, the 2010 Survey results show that the plurality of Americans perceives China as an ally of the United States and only a minority sees it as an enemy. 42.2% of respondents saw China as an ally, 29.6% held neutral views, and only 27.3% saw China as an enemy. The majority (54.9%) of Americans rated the Chinese government's handling of its relations with the US as fair.

We also used the feeling 'thermometer' to measure the respondent's holistic assessment of four Asian powers: China, India, Russia, and Japan. The American feeling 'thermometer' scores towards China are fairly normally distributed, meaning that most respondents either felt neutral or did not know how to feel towards China. Overall, China received an average thermometer score of 48.0. This value closely matches the median score of 50. On average, as illustrated in Figure 1, the American people's general feeling toward China falls on the cool side of the feeling thermometer (48.0/100) which leaves it the lowest ranked, on average, among the four countries. It is understandable that Americans hold a much warmer feeling toward Japan (66.6/100) – which has been a liberal democracy and has by now become a long-term ally of the US. It is quite interesting to see that their feeling toward China is even significantly lower than that toward Russia (50.2/100), despite the Cold War and continuing disagreements between Russia and the US.

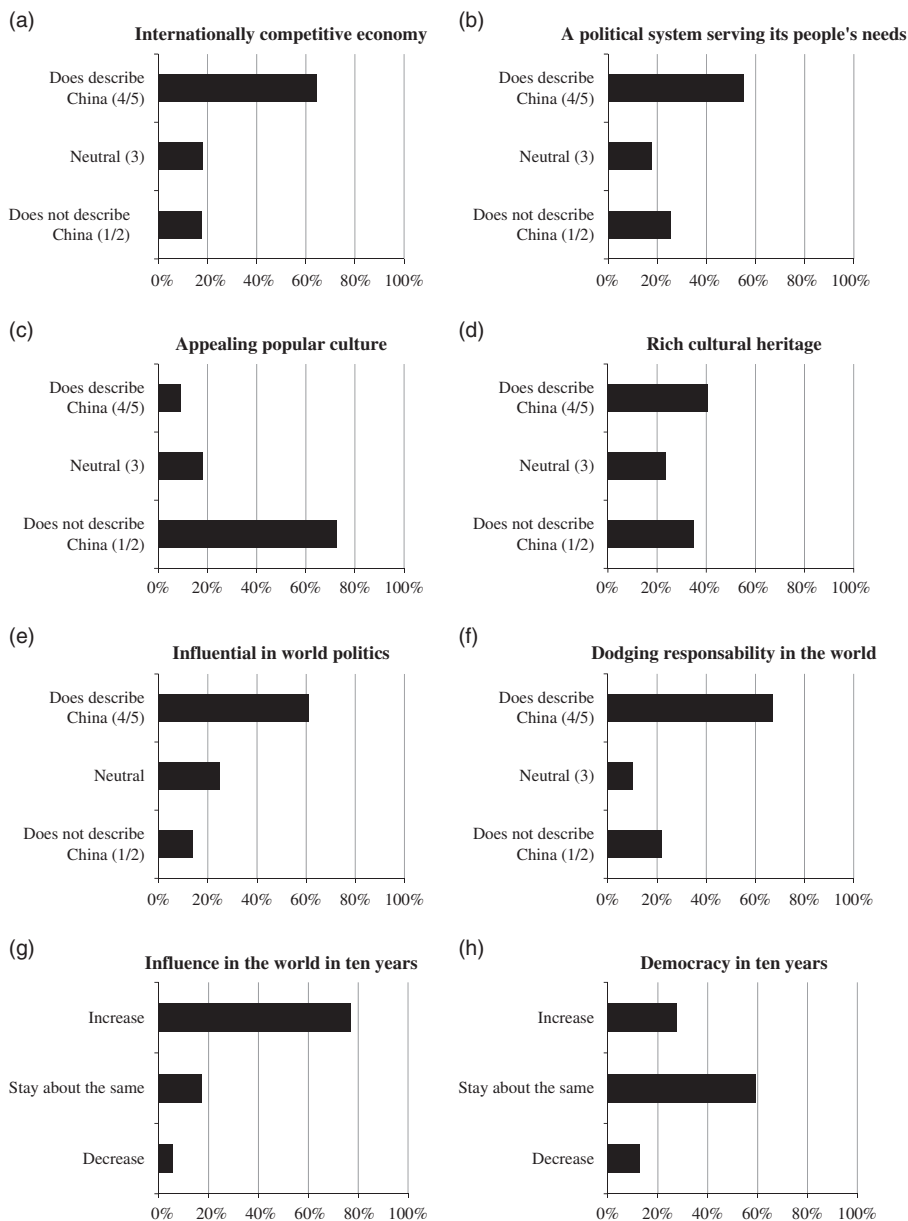


**Figure 1.** How Americans feel about China? Source: AACS 2010 ( $N = 810$ ).

The American public recognizes the success of the Chinese economic system. Survey findings show an emerging consensus that China is a rising power in the international system, 60.8% of Americans agree that China has been influential in world politics while only 13.9% disagree. 64.3% of Americans agree that ‘China’s economy is internationally competitive’. The vast majority of Americans (77.0%) believe that China’s influence in the world will increase over the next ten years. The majority of the American public attaches great importance to Sino-US relations and acknowledge that the two powers share common interests. 59.3% of Americans believe that ‘if the US completely cut off trade with China, the United States (more than China’s) economy would hurt more’. The majority of Americans (71.4%) understands that China loans more money to the US while only 24.8% believe that the US loans more money to China. Despite the media hype about China’s currency, only 28.9% of Americans agreed with the statement ‘currency manipulation is being carried out by China, with the intent of profiting in international trade’ issue. These results are consistent with the findings of other surveying groups, such as the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which found most Americans believe that China is the most important country in relation to the United States. A strong majority of Americans prefer to undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China rather than actively work to limit the growth of China’s power.

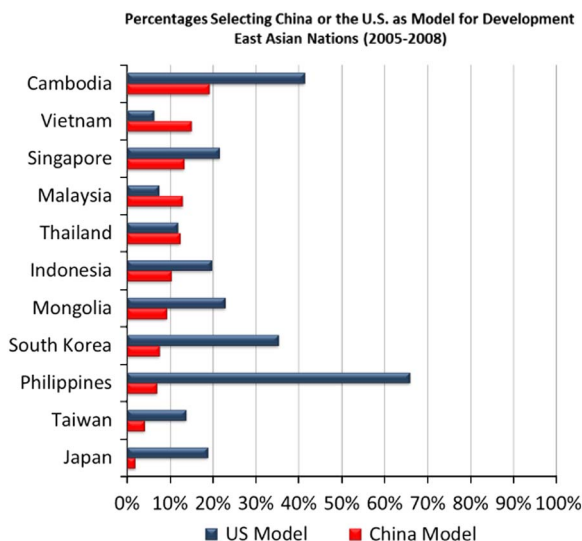
Contrary to some American politicians’ beliefs, then, not only is there a broadly held understanding of the significance of China for the US, but Americans also clearly perceive the rise of China and its significant and increasing influence in the world.<sup>9</sup> Such findings should not be too surprising, given the close Sino-US economic connections and the American media’s extensive coverage of related issues. Overall, then, the American public holds a cautious attitude toward China. Consistent with our findings on the American people’s recognition of the significance of China and its rise, Americans are also able to evaluate China on a variety of characteristics, covering a number of dimensions of this nation and its standing and image.

Our survey gauges how the American public views China’s economic performance, political system, cultural attractiveness, and international behavior. As illustrated in



**Figure 2.** American people’s multidimensional views of China. Source: AACS 2010 (N = 810).

Figures 2(a) and (b), nearly two in three Americans recognize the international competitiveness of the Chinese economy; and about 55% of the American public believes that China’s political system is effective in serving its people’s needs. Survey results shows that the American people do not view China antagonistically but are uncompromising when it comes to issues of ideological import in US–China relations,



**Figure 3.** Perceptions of China vs. the US as a model of development.

especially human rights. Even though 55.0% of Americans believe that China has a political system that serves the needs of its people, 80.2% felt that China withholds political rights from its citizens. When asked to state their number one concern with China, the three most common responses were human rights (14.4%), trade deficit (8.7%), and job loss (5.7%). When it comes to issues in US–China relations, 67.6% of Americans believed that ‘defending human rights in China’ should be given high or the highest priority. For comparison, 65.5% believed that ‘promoting better environmental practices’ and 56.6% believed that ‘promoting fair trade’ should be given high or the highest priority (see Figures 2).

The survey shows that American political values and beliefs play a decisive role in views on China’s political system. American values tend towards individualism while Chinese values are much more collective. We found that values consistent with traditional Chinese culture, such as sacrificing individual interests for the good of the collective and obedience of elders did not appeal to the majority of Americans. When Americans are asked if ‘for the sake of national interests, individual interests could be sacrificed,’ 53.4% approved, and 45.4% disapproved. When asked ‘for the sake of the family, the individual should put his interests second’ 46.2% approved, and 52.6% disapproved. Finally, when asked ‘a student should not question the authority of his or her teacher’ only 31.9% approved, and 67.5% disapproved.

The American public’s assessment of Chinese culture, however, is much less positive than what the Chinese government has hoped for. As shown in Figures 2(c) and (d), less than 30% of the American people think China’s popular culture is appealing; and only a little more than 40% recognize the rich cultural heritage of China. It is worth noting that these data were collected only two years after the highly popular Beijing Olympics. They speak directly to certain aspects that have always



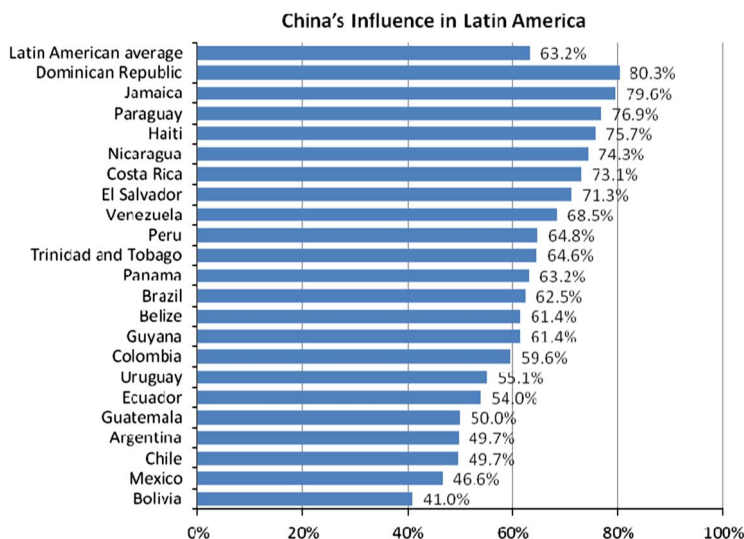


Figure 4. China's influence in Latin America.

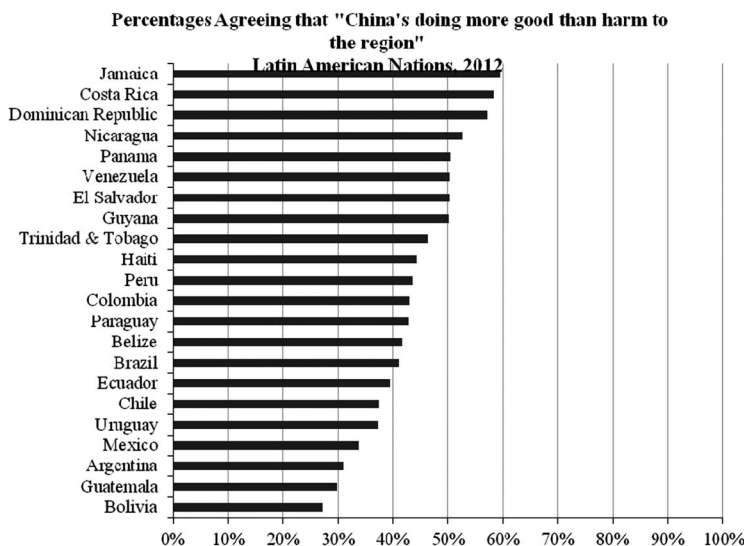
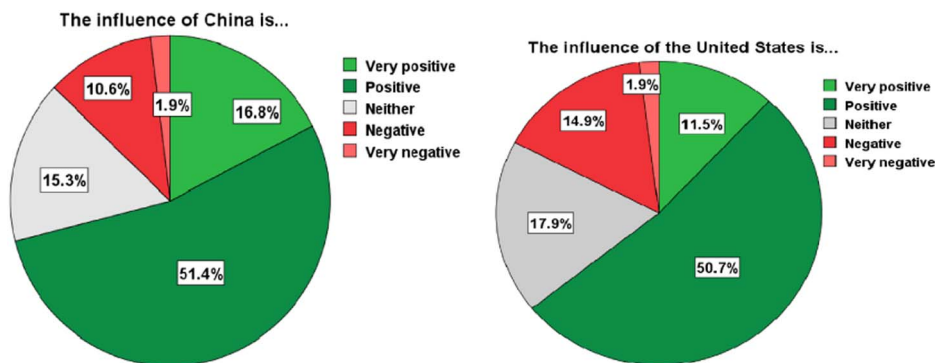


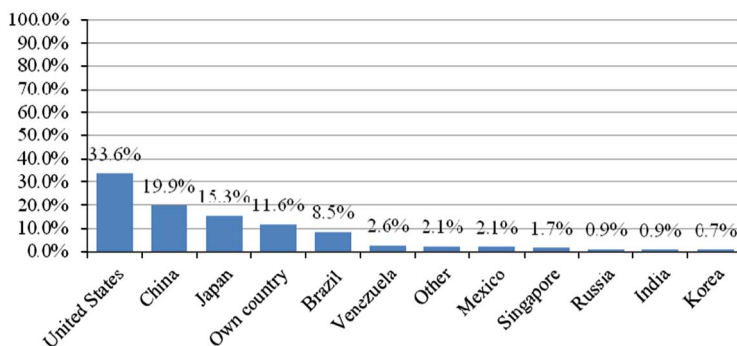
Figure 5. Positive and negative influence of China in Latin America.

been a major selling point for China's public diplomacy, suggesting that the Chinese government has a great deal of work to do if it is to achieve its goals in this area.

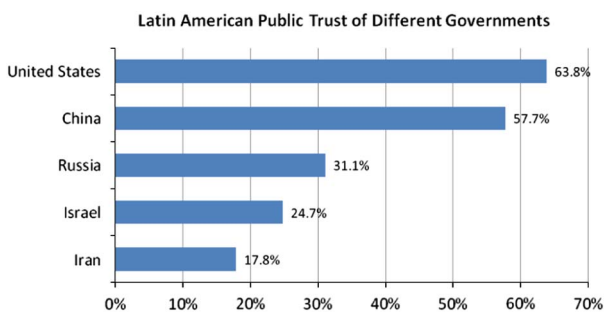
Americans hold quite nuanced views of China's international behavior and influence, as shown in Figures 2(e) and (f). About three in five Americans regard China as a world power with significant influence, but two in three believe that China has been dodging its international responsibility. Of course, the data do not allow us to



**Figure 6.** China’s influence and US influence in Latin America. Source: @Americas Barometer by LAPOP, 2012.



**Figure 7.** Latin American views of the model for development.



**Figure 8.** Latin American public trust of different governments.

examine which policies adopted by China in the world might have driven this perception of China dodging its international responsibility, whether these emanate from perceptions of China’s policy with respect to global climate change, the Korean Peninsula, civil wars in Africa and the Middle East, or wholly other sources. These findings, nonetheless, clearly contradict what the Chinese government tries to present

to its audience in the world – that China is a growing and responsible power in the international community.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Asian Views of China's Rise**

The 12 Asian countries/regions survey covers East Asia and Southeast Asia, an area of diverse political and cultural backgrounds. The fieldwork of the ABS Wave III expanded over a time span of roughly two years from January 2010 to February 2012. During our survey, the larger international and regional setting was more stable and calmer than either the preceding year or the rest of 2012. Between 2010 and 2011, most East Asian economies registered a strong economic rebound from the severe contraction brought about by the 2008–2009 Great Recession. The contagion of sovereign debt crisis in the Euro zone was still seemingly under control. Also during this period, both the tension over the South China Sea between China and its ASEAN neighbors and the confrontation between Japan and China over the Diaoyu Islands had not yet reached boiling point. Arguably, it was probably the best time to establish the base-line data for longitudinal comparison.

The aggregate survey results offer us a glimpse of how Asian peoples in various countries and regions view China. These divergent views and perceptions are the outcome of quite complex factors, ranging from China's own domestic performances to its relations and dealings with its neighboring countries, perceived and represented (and misrepresented) by media and other interest groups, such as national governments, local politicians, businesses, academics, etc. with quite diverse political, ideological and economic backgrounds. China's soft power initiative, or 'charm offensive', can therefore only be viewed in this context as one amidst multiple points of reference. In other words, our survey data establish no direct correlation with China's recent endeavors to promote its image. Instead, the findings provide room for thought on the complicated but dynamic interactions among the various factors that are shaping the public opinion of a rising power, i.e. China, and the ways in which these perceptions affect its relationships with other countries and vice versa. Finally, by adopting a relatively less employed methodological approach to conduct comparative, cross-regional and inter-continental (such as Asia) public opinion research on the rise of a given country and to measure its impact in international politics, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the political and cultural dynamics of one of the most densely populated continents in the world.

The survey data show several important patterns. First of all, the survey data show that across East Asia, a great majority of people think the rise of China is inevitable and China in ten years will become the most influential player in Asia. Secondly, people in most East Asian countries tend to believe that China's rise does more good than harm to the region. In terms of country-to-country patterns, first there is a contrast between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. With the exception of the Chinese themselves, the higher proportion of people holding a positive view about China's impact are found mostly in Southeast Asia countries, whereas those in adjacent countries and regions such as Korean, Taiwanese and Mongolian have very

**Table 1.** The battery of the national image project (Asian barometer version)

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Q156. Which country has the most influence in Asia?  
 Q157. Does (answer in Q156) do more good or harm to the region?  
**Ask Q157a if the answer in Q156 is not China, otherwise skip to Q158**  
 Q157a. Does China do more good or harm to the region?  
 Q158. In ten years, which country will have the most influence in Asia?  
 Q159. Which country should be a model for our own country's future development?  
 Q160. How much influence does China have on our country?  
 Q161. General speaking, the influence China has on our country is?

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**Table 2.** Which country has the most influence in Asia?

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Country	China	United States
Vietnam	<b>69%</b>	16%
Taiwan	<b>67%</b>	21%
Mongolia	<b>66%</b>	13%
Japan	<b>61%</b>	29%
Singapore	<b>60%</b>	28%
Korea	<b>56%</b>	32%
China	<b>44%</b>	25%
Thailand	42%	<b>44%</b>
Malaysia	36%	<b>44%</b>
Cambodia	26%	<b>58%</b>
Indonesia	23%	<b>41%</b>
Philippines	17%	<b>66%</b>
Southeast Asia's Average	39%	<b>42%</b>
Overall Average	<b>47%</b>	35%

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Note: Southeast Asia's average is computed by the figures of seven countries: Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Philippines. The bold indicates a percentage of 44% or larger.

Data source: ABS Wave III (2010–2012)

mixed views on China (Figure 6). While people in Northeast Asia feel strongly about the inevitability of China's rise, their reservations about its impact seem to be in direct proportion to their recognition of its omnipresence. Second, the United States' role is significant in shaping the Asian perception of China's influence in Asia. On average, Southeast Asian people consider the influence of the United States in Asia to be stronger than China. However, their view of China's influence is much more positive than Northeast Asian people. While reaping the benefit of economic interdependency with China, the people in Southeast Asian countries clearly feel much less insecure and anxious about China's growing presence – they can safely fall back on the US as a strategic bedrock when an imminent security threat arises. Third, a large proportion

**Table 3.** Which country will have the most influence in Asia in ten years?

Country	China	United States
Korea	<b>83%</b>	9%
Taiwan	<b>82%</b>	10%
Singapore	<b>73%</b>	13%
Mongolia	<b>71%</b>	9%
Vietnam	<b>70%</b>	16%
Japan	<b>65%</b>	13%
China	<b>59%</b>	11%
Thailand	<b>56%</b>	31%
Malaysia	<b>44%</b>	26%
Cambodia	<b>43%</b>	34%
Indonesia	31%	<b>33%</b>
Philippines	17%	<b>65%</b>
Southeast Asia's Average	<b>48%</b>	31%
East Asia's Average	<b>58%</b>	22%

Note: Southeast Asia's average is computed by the figures of seven countries: Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Philippines.

Data source: ABS Wave III (2010–2012)

of people in China's neighboring countries, including South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines hold positive view about China's impact on the region despite the political and territorial disputes. The deepening of economic interdependence and integration is perhaps most obvious reason.

While economic interests and geopolitical concerns affect the Asian peoples' views of China at both individual and national levels, the question of 'model for development' reveals deep-seated ideological underpinnings and value judgment. One of the most interesting findings in our survey is that when asked about the 'which country should be a model for our own country's future development,' surprisingly only 27.2% of the Chinese respondents chose China, while 35.8% chose the United States as its model for development. The current campaign of the 'China Dream' or 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' is conspicuously bereft of substantive values and ideologies.

At the macro, nation-state level, more people in Cambodia and Vietnam select China as a model than other countries surveyed, and Southeast Asians – including Singaporean, Malaysians and Thais – tend to have more believers in the China model than China's East Asian neighbors, with the notable exception of the Philippines. A variety of explanations are available, such as political ideologies, and political cultural factors such as political and social systems, traditional views or so-called 'Asian Values', i.e. strong inclinations to families, paternalism, social hierarchies, conservative attitudes toward social changes, Confucianism, and so on. Modern political cultures and geopolitical concerns may play a role, too. In the case of Vietnam, similar experiences of reform and political ideologies of communism and

socialism may create some sense of affinity, while in post-communist Mongolia or anti-communist Taiwan the ideological hostility is more pronounced. At a micro, individual level, research shows that (1) East Asians that viewed their own government as non-corrupt/practicing good governance did not choose China as a model (or any other country as a model except their own); (2) East Asians that were more politically traditional were more likely to choose China as a model, but were also willing to choose other alternatives as well; (3) less educated East Asians were more likely to select China as a model; (4) East Asians that perceived China as having more influence and making a positive difference within their own country were more likely to select China as a model.<sup>11</sup>

Divergent East Asian public views on China show no clear patterns of economic, geopolitical interests and ideological and cultural affiliations, and cannot be adequately explained by the ideational determinants intrinsic to those countries. The low level of trust and interest among the Asians (and Chinese) in the China model shows a serious lacuna in the so-called 'core socialist values' as the backbones of China's soft power. Since Asian countries have had close cultural, traditional ties with China for millennia, their low interest in the China model is indicative of China's own failure to persuade its Asian 'relatives' of its development model, in spite of China's shining economic achievements and growing political might. Moreover, while on average 26.1% of East Asians choose the American model, only 8.9% choose the China model, and 26.9% of East Asians choose their own model for developments. East Asia is a major powerhouse for the world economy and, indeed, for world affairs at large, and East Asians are aggressively searching for better models for their socioeconomic development. For China, the US and Japan and any ambitious nations aspiring for dominance in the region, the arena of ideology and values once again will emerge as a major battleground for 'soft power' competition after the end of the Cold War.

### **The Latin American Views of China's Rise**

In 2009, Xi Jinping, then China's Vice President, told overseas Chinese when visiting Mexico: 'there are a few foreigners, with full bellies, who have nothing better to do than try to point fingers at our country. China does not export revolution, hunger, poverty, nor does China cause you any headaches. Just what else do you want?'<sup>12</sup> His message was viewed as a rebuttal to the US-led campaign against China's human rights records. However, delivered to the Chinese working in South America at the moment of China's growing economic expansion and political influence in the region, Xi's words can be read as a premonition of China's deepening involvement in the backyard of the United States. Unlike China's relationship with its Asian neighbors, the historical trajectory of the China–Latin America relationship is defined by distance, caution, and gradual expansion.

China's diplomatic breakthrough in Latin America occurred in 1960, with its first embassy in Cuba. Most Latin American countries retained diplomatic ties with Taiwan until the late 1970s. In general, China's non-interference foreign policy

guided its relations with Latin America with distance and caution. However, in recent decades China's global expansion has reached Latin America and caught the attention, in particular, of the American political, economic and social elites. David Shambaugh, a leading China expert in the US, warned in 2008 that, '[China's] economic interaction is growing [in Latin America], but not the region's knowledge about China'. Shambaugh continues, 'China's ties with Central and South America are anchored in trade and driven by an insatiable hunger for natural resources. Trade between China and Latin America increased by 1,200% or from 10\$ to 130\$ billion dollars between 2000 and 2009. In 2007 China's top 10 trade partners in the region were Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Panama, Columbia, Costa Rica and Cuba.'<sup>13</sup>

Given the historical and geopolitical distance between China and Latin America, China's growing influence in the region is quite significant. The 2012 joint Shanghai Jiao Tong University–Duke University–Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey polled 26 Latin American countries using a battery of questions similar to those of the Asian Barometer surveys. The data show a clear awareness of such influence with a generally positive attitude.

The survey shows that 68.2% Latin Americans think China's influence in the region is positive, and 62.2% think the US's influence is positive. More positive views of China's influence than the US's may suggest China's overall performance as a modernizing country, or a former Third World developing country, which is significant to the Latin American public concerned about their own modernization. China's pragmatic and non-conflicting diplomacy (non-interference) is effective in Latin America, compared with China's role in other regions, particularly the neighboring Asian-Pacific region. It is true China and Latin America have no territorial problems, given the distance between the two continents. However, since China's rise inevitably constitutes a geopolitical challenge to the status quo with the US dominance, China's expansion in Latin America is no longer a bilateral or inter-continental issues. Evan Ellis, an expert on China–Latin America relations who teaches at the US National Defense University, contends that 'from a political perspective, some in Latin America also see the increasing role of China in the region as a potential lever for asserting independence from the political influence of the United States and the economic dominance of Western institutions. Still others express concern about the long-term geopolitical ambitions of the PRC and worry about exchanging one form of dependency.'<sup>14</sup>

Surprisingly, China only just trails the US as a role model for Latin American development, overtaking Japan, Brazil and its own model. The trust rate for China is also quite impressive, an indication of strong popular sentiment for alternative models of development rather than the Brazil–Mexico pro-US 'free market' liberal model. China's approval rating for its development model and trust is higher in the ALBA (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) countries, which were spearheaded by Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro as a political entity against the backdrop of the US influence. ALBA countries have greater trust in China (51.9%) than in the United States (40%). Although Chinese leaders such as Xi Jinping has vowed repeatedly to stay

away from ‘exporting revolution’ abroad, left-leaning Latin American governments and the general public show more sympathy and interest in China’s development model, and implicitly its political values as an alternative to the US and its western ideological allies. Venezuela is the only country in which China (24.5%) surpasses the US (12.5%) as a role model for development.

### Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most significant lessons one can draw from these survey data in the US, East Asia and Latin America is that public opinion, attitudes and perceptions of China’s rise are the outcome of dynamic interactions and assemblage of factors, a synergy of material interests, ideational and emotional reactions, and values, ideologies, principles, unraveling themselves against a highly volatile, precarious and contentious geopolitical backdrop, in which the interests of nation-states and individuals became intertwined and inseparable. Economic integration and interdependence with China loom large in public opinion of Americans and Asians. China’s economy has become intensively integrated with Asia and the United States, so much so that it is simply inconceivable for each individual citizen in these two parts of the world to detach his/her everyday material life from the presence of China. And above all, it is China’s astounding economic achievement that catapults it to the current status.

The world is, however, not quite prepared to accept China’s sudden ascendance as a historically ‘natural’ course, history thus being understood in almost exclusively Western terms – China’s trajectory of economic modernization is truly unprecedented in modern world history, which is not only led by, but also told by, the West. Therefore values, ideas, memories, and indeed, deep-seated biases and prejudices, all come to underlie our perceptions and attitudes toward China, above and beyond our rational, and pragmatic calculations based on material and economic interests. China on the other hand is equally ill prepared. It now knows its economic might, and it does not shy from flexing its muscles. China’s guiding ideology of pragmatism for the last three decades tends to capitalize on its economic reserve in dealing with the world at large. At times when delicate sensibilities, lofty ideals, morals and values, i.e. soft power capabilities, are invoked, a stereotypically inscrutable and mysterious China re-emerges: the display of high conformity and uniformity at the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, meant to showcase China’s newly acquired strength, somewhat backfired, as the world’s public opinion, polled by the BBC in 2008 and 2009, saw a considerable drop in positive feelings towards China in the aftermath of the Beijing Olympics.<sup>15</sup>

During and after our global surveys were conducted and completed, a chain of events occurred, with significant impacts on how China is perceived in the world. Domestically, the new leader Xi Jinping has pushed an aggressive agenda of what Robert Zoellick called a ‘mix of Mao and market’, referring to the adamant refusal to enact political reform on the one hand and having bold pro-market economic measures on the other, raising the skepticism that ‘whether a policy of Mao and the market proves internally consistent.’<sup>16</sup> In the ideological and cultural arena, Xi’s



policy looks tougher and more conservative than his predecessors, clamping down on political dissent and criticism on the internet, forbidding discussions of universalism, constitutionalism, and so on, while proclaiming the Chinese Dream and urging the Chinese people to gain 'confidence in the theory, the road and the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and forge valiantly and unswervingly ahead along the right road.'<sup>17</sup> However, to persuade the Chinese people to have confidence in the Chinese Dream and the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party is a formidable challenge to the leadership. As argued elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> the legitimization crisis lurking behind the astonishing economic growth ever since the reform and opening up, has resurfaced over and again. Underlying the issue of China's global image and soft power is the ideological and legitimization crisis that the new leadership has yet to come to terms with.

Internationally, China began to seek more pro-active roles in areas in which it had for a long time kept a low profile, such as the Middle East, and multilateral engagements elsewhere in the world, such as with the European Union, Russia, African and Latin American countries. However, its relationship with the United States over the years has become increasingly defined by competition rather than cooperation, with mutual distrust.<sup>19</sup> The Obama administration's Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy as a US policy initiative has impacted geopolitical conditions in the region significantly, as China's relationship with Japan has plummeted to a dangerous level with imminent military confrontation, and territorial and maritime disputes with Southeast Asian countries have escalated in recent years.

The crossroad of economic interests, political, ideological, and cultural values, and geopolitical considerations that China traverses now is by no means seamless and clearly charted. Not only is the ever-diversifying, fragmenting Chinese society now fermented with cries for political and ideological overhaul and structural reforms of its economy and society, but the world at large is both perplexed and animated by China's rise and its political, ideological, social and economic implications globally. Moreover, it is simply improbable for China to return to its past foreclosures and the Chinese Dream and Chinese way must withstand the test of globalization, of which China is not only one of the greatest beneficiaries but also an integral part. The global public opinion matters regarding China's image and its relationship with the world, but it is the Chinese people's views and expectations of the country's present and future that matter first and foremost.

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