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The Image of China in the West

How the Public in the US, Latin America, and East Asia Sees an Emerging China

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The People's Republic of China's dramatic transformation has not only benefited its people, but has also led it to become a major player in the world. Here we examine how deeply perceptions of China have penetrated into the public's perceptions in a wide variety of nations around the world – the US, 11 nations in East Asia, and 22 in Latin America. We ask a series of questions: how much do people know? How do Americans evaluate China? And how do publics in East Asia and Latin America view China's influence in their nations and around the world? We also examine some of the ways in which perceptions vary, both across nations and within nations, such as by partisanship. In addition, we report the results of an experiment using an advertisement the PRC ran in the US to assess how successful they were in shaping public opinion about China. We conclude that our studies, and those of others, provide a strong baseline for assessing the effect of an emerging superpower on citizens around the world.

Economic growth in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has dramatically transformed the lives of its citizens. That growth has many other significant consequences. Here we look at one of these: how growth has thrust China into the center of world attention. China is one of the first nations to emerge as a major world power since survey research has penetrated throughout much of the world. And we are fortunate to have been able to ask a variety of questions regarding China's rise to public consciousness in large numbers of nations. In particular, we look at the way citizens of 34 societies on three continents perceive, understand, and evaluate the rise and influence of the PRC. As a result, we can make some tentative inferences about the spread of perceptions of the 'rising China' across a diverse array of societies around the world. While it is true that citizens of nations far from China are likely to have

little information close at hand for assessing a nation relatively newly making headlines around the world, our survey data will support the conclusion that they are able to do so rather readily. The PRC has seized on this set of circumstances to seek to actively cultivate positive images of China, as part of its global campaign to increase China's 'soft power'.[1] And, of course, the PRC is not alone in noting the critical interaction between public opinion and their even-weakly held perceptions on the one hand and elite ambitions on the other. We will observe illustrations of the effect of this interaction between elites seeking to shape public opinion and the public's existing stock of knowledge.

We examine the degree to which this increasing centrality of China in world affairs has penetrated into the general public of a wide variety of societies in recent years: the US (in 2010 and 2012), 22 nations in Latin America (LAPOP in 2012),[2] and 11 societies in East Asia (ABS II, 2005–08).[3] We ask a series of questions in this essay. How deeply does information about China penetrate into the general public at all, in bordering societies as well as in nations far from China? For those with the cognitive capability to respond to relevant questions, just what attitudes, perceptions, and values do they hold regarding China? How does this set of attitudes toward China compare with attitudes held about other relevant nations? And how does that differ across people, groups, or nations?

Public Opinion: Problems and Significance

It is well established that, unlike politicians and political scientists, average people do not have sufficient information or the sophisticated cognitive capability to comprehensively evaluate political issues and then form related opinions.[4] In the 1940s and 1950s, when serious polling took hold in the US, even thoughtful academics were surprised at the apparent level of ignorance of even basic facts in the public (e.g., Berelson *et al.*[5]). In today's advanced democracies, the average citizen's stock of political knowledge that provides the critical information basis for public opinion is surprisingly low. Thus, it is understandable that there remains a strain of worry about the ability of citizens to fulfill their role, responsibly, in today's democracies. The situation in non-democracies could be even worse, given their prevailing media censorship, information control, and underdevelopment of information infrastructure and technologies. Moreover, compared with citizens' knowledge of domestic political issues, their possessed information regarding international affairs and foreign policies is even poorer.[6,7]

Nevertheless, in contrast to these established findings, some political scientists (e.g., Aldrich *et al.*,[8] Page and Shapiro,[9] Erikson *et al.*[10]) show that, on average, not only do citizens' responses about public affairs seem at least sensible (what Key and Cummings[11] called the 'responsible electorate') but that public policies (including foreign policies), in the US and many other democracies, change in response to the dynamics of opinions held by the public. This is not something unique to democracies, the institutional setting of which provides critical channels for public opinion to exert its influence. In today's many non-democracies, authoritarian leaders have to respond, at least to some extent, to their public's opinions and take

them into consideration when making public policies. In some cases, these countries, such as China, care greatly about the public opinion of foreign societies in order to develop their foreign policies and facilitate or achieve various goals.

In short, despite typically low levels of information and incompletely formulated perceptions, opinions, and evaluations, public opinion provides critical information for understanding domestic politics and foreign policies throughout the world. Given the salience of China's rising over the past decades, public opinion data from 34 societies on three continents offer invaluable information for us to examine how China is viewed in today's world. And such information not only yields insight into China's emergence as a world power, but also has real implications for contemporary international relations.

How Much Do People Know?

Before diving into the rich public opinion data, we want to show how much people know about China, that is, the first step in opinion formation. In Figure 1, we present the average percentages of respondents who claimed not to have an opinion across three questions asked in evaluation of China (e.g., responded 'don't know' when asked) in East Asian and Latin American societies.[12]

Asian and Latin American public opinion survey data make the point crystal-clear. Guatemala and Thailand's respondents' average non-response rates were around 40%; while in Indonesia, Bolivia, Belize, Paraguay, and Brazil the average non-response rates were about 30%. The other East Asian societies and many Latin American countries witnessed average non-response rates less than 20%, sometimes even much less (e.g., Mongolia, South Korea, Cambodia, and Japan). Overall, respondents of East Asian societies, on average, showed a higher level of familiarity with China, as compared with their Latin American counterparts.[13] Nevertheless, given the varying identities of these nations, it is not obvious that proximity to China, overall education in the nation, or degree of Chinese trade and economic investment in the nations can easily explain this wide variation.

The 'glass half full' (or more than half full) interpretation of the data is that people in many and diverse lands report some ability to respond to rather specific and information-demanding evaluations of the PRC, even when they are given a prompt that encourages them to report they do not have an opinion about that question. Of course, this is but a baseline, because we might well wonder if the respondents are providing meaningful variation. To examine this we turn to our next question.

How Do People Evaluate China, at least in the US?

We begin with a detailed look at the US data, drawing from three rounds of interviewing the American public in 2010 and 2012 (with two waves, before and after the presidential election) in which we were able to ask the same set of questions. The data will be used to show that at least American respondents are capable of evaluating China in a rich and complex way, covering a variety of dimensions of evaluation.

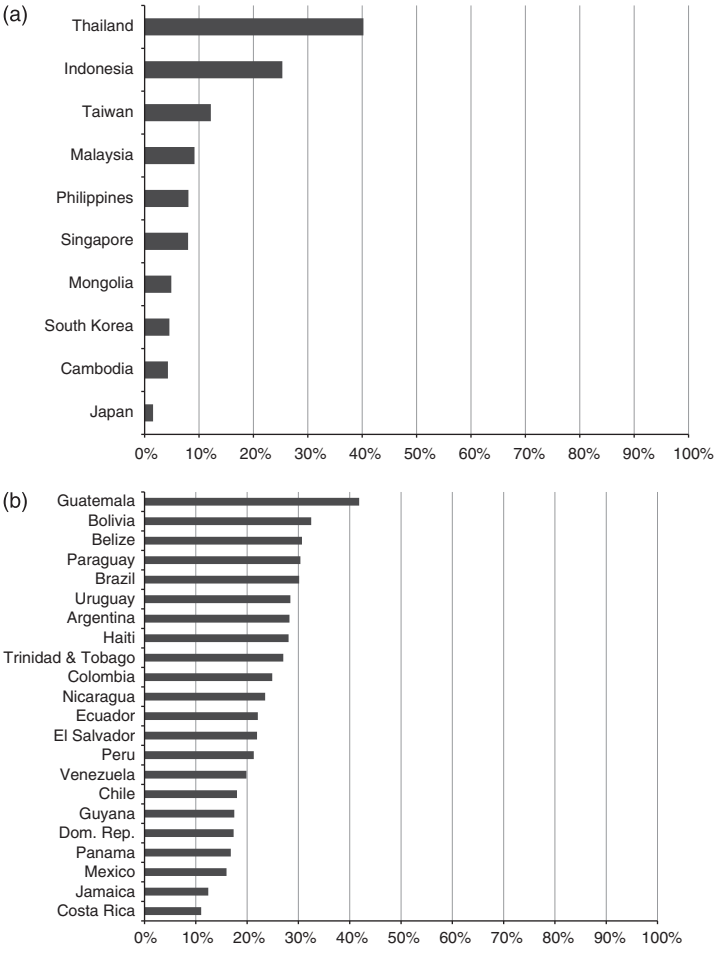

Figure 1. Absence of opinion in evaluating China. (a) Average percentages reporting a 'don't know' to China-specific questions. Various East Asian societies (three items, 2005–2008). (b) Average percentages reporting a 'don't know' to China-specific questions. Various Latin American societies (three items, 2012).

While there is a genuine degree of variability in their views over time, we are also able to show that these views are at least as stable – and perhaps more so – than many political evaluations the American public makes about its own political system.

We begin with an overall assessment of China – how warmly do people feel toward China and how does that compare with other nations? In Figure 2 we report the average 'feeling thermometer' evaluations of four nations: Japan, India, Russia, and China, as asked in each of our three rounds of interviews. These questions ask for a general, overall assessment about how warmly or coolly the respondent feels toward the nation in question, with 50 denoting the 'neither warmly nor coolly' mid-point.

The figure clearly illustrates two conclusions. First, China is slightly negatively assessed, on average, and in this regard, it trails the other three nations. In both Japan

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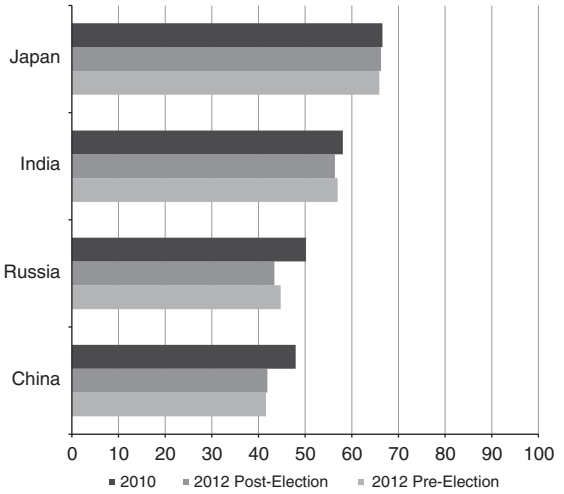

Figure 2. Evaluations of various nations by the US public. Thermometer scores for various nations. The US surveys (2010 and 2012).

and India, the mean evaluation lies above the neutral midpoint, thus being positively seen on average. It is unsurprising that Russia is evaluated negatively, nearly seven points below neutral in our 2012 surveys. It may be more surprising that China is, if anything, even slightly more negatively perceived overall.

The second conclusion is that these evaluations are stable (in the aggregate) over time but also responsive to immediate surrounding socioeconomic and political environments. There is simply little variation in the American public's views of Japan and India across the three waves of surveys. This is also little change in their views of Russia and China before and after the 2012 presidential election. As expected, the American public's views of Russia and China were more negative in 2012, compared with their views in 2010. This should not be surprising, given the salience of China as an issue in the 2012 presidential election, as well as the significance of the Russia factor in American public debates on its foreign policies. Moreover, the China issue (like Russia) was addressed in the 2012 presidential campaigns mostly in a negative light, which could have contributed to this downturn in the American public's general feeling toward both.

Underlying these overall feelings about China is a rich and complex set of particular evaluations. These can be seen in Figure 3, in which we ask about eight dimensions on which Americans might have opinions about China.

These data yield two observations. First there is real variation across the eight dimensions.[14] Substantial percentages believe that China withholds rights from its citizens, dodges international responsibility, and yet is influential in world politics. There is relatively little agreement that China has a popular culture that Americans find appealing, even though they do agree it has a rich cultural heritage. Economic evaluations are also mixed. The second observation is that there is considerable movement in these evaluations over time. This is most evident for the question of

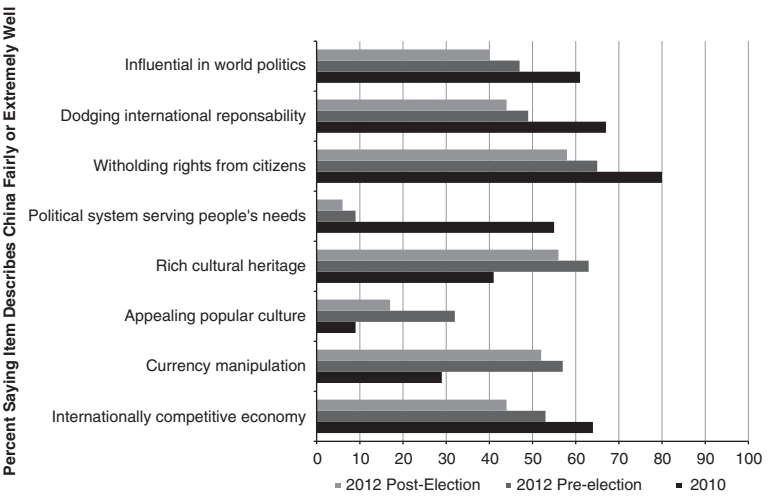

Figure 3. The US public's evaluations of China on various dimensions. Percentages saying item describes China fairly or extremely well. The US surveys (2010 and 2012).

whether China has a political system serving people's needs. In 2010, the average respondent agreed that this item described China fairly or extremely well. But during the presidential election campaign of 2012, that percentage plummeted to very low proportions.

One might worry that our claim that there is stability in the American public's responses is not obvious from the data in Figure 3. Fortunately, we can address that question for the two waves of the 2012 survey in a rigorous way. These two rounds of interviews were designed as a panel. With the same respondents answering the same questions at two points in time, we can examine the correlations in these measures over time. High correlations indicate high stability.

Figure 4 presents the Pearson's correlation coefficients for the nine survey items examined in Figures 2 and 3 between the two waves of the 2012 survey. The coefficients range from about 0.38 (for the political rights question) to 0.61 (for the feeling thermometer question). To put these numbers in context, these are at the high range to the very high range in comparison to, for example, survey respondents' evolutions of important political issues in the US, as famously documented by Converse.[15,16] That is to say, even though over a shorter time period, responses to these questions are rather stable, especially the net evaluations captured by the 'feeling' thermometer. This is modestly surprising, given that these are not questions about Americans' own nation and lives but about a foreign and distant one.

How East Asia and Latin American Citizens View China's Influence

That at least the US data support the idea that the public views China in a rich, complex, and stable way begs the question at the center of this inquiry: how is a rising

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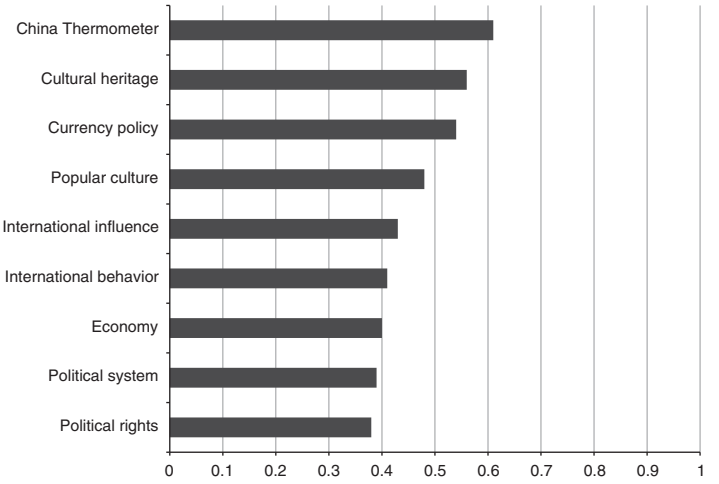

Figure 4. Stability in the American public's views of China. Pearson correlations between pre and post-waves (2012).

China viewed? We asked our respondents in the 33 societies included in the Asian and Latin American surveys the questions, 'Does China do more good than harm in the region'. And we further asked them which nation 'ought to be a model for the future development of their country?' to document the perceptions of China's 'soft power'. Given the status and influence of the US in today's world, we intentionally compare the frequency of those saying that it should be the US to those preferring China. These questions get at the heart of how the world sees the influence of a rising China, and are at the core of the strategy of shaping public opinion as a way of developing soft power for a newly emerging China. The results are reported in Figures 5 and 6 respectively.

As Figure 5 shows clearly, there is extremely wide variation in evaluations of the nature of China's influence in different regions. In East Asian societies such as Singapore, Cambodia, Philippines, and Malaysia, the average respondent thinks China is doing more good than harm to the region; but in Thailand, Mongolia, and especially Vietnam and Japan, very few share such a view; those with opinions generally believe China is doing more harm than good to the region. While the percentages are a bit less extreme in the Latin American nations, there is still considerable variation from nation to nation: some countries, such as Jamaica, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, mostly see Chinese influence as doing more good to the region; while Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, Argentina, Guatemala, and Bolivia are examples of the nations whose public is most likely to perceive more harm than good coming from China's influence on the region.

As Figure 6 makes clear, there is relatively little support for China being the model for the respondent's own nation to follow in their future development. Only in Costa Rica, Jamaica, Venezuela, and Guyana do as many as one in five select China as their model for future development. In East Asia, only Cambodia nears that level.

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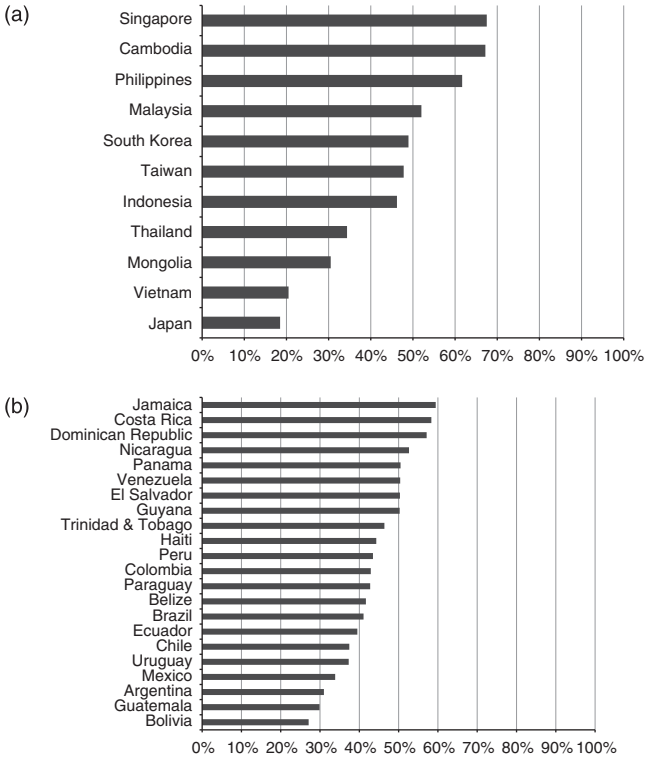

Figure 5. Perceptions of China's influence in the region. (a) Percentages agreeing that 'China is doing more good than harm in the region'. Various East Asian societies (2005–2008). (b) Percentages agreeing that 'China is doing more good than harm in the region'. Various Latin American societies (2012).

Conversely, there is much wider variation in the perception that the US serves as a role model of development. In the surveyed East Asian societies, the US often far exceeds China in this regard. Only in Vietnam, Malaysia, and (barely) Thailand do more favor China over the US as a role model; while in many of the rest, the US retains a clear lead. Rather, the same is true among our Latin American nations. Only four nations (Costa Rica, Jamaica, Venezuela, and Uruguay) have more respondents preferring China over the US; with Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina being quite close in their choices. The rest have pluralities that select the US over China, sometimes with very large leads.

These data are perhaps about what one might expect for a relatively newly emerging international power like China. The public might be intrigued by the 'new kid on the block', but are more likely to be wary of a nation newly seeking to influence their own nation. Meanwhile, the US has a long lead in playing that role. China has entered public consciousness but has a lot of work (and opportunities) left for building at least this specific dimension of soft power. These findings raise another interesting question: 'Can China indeed influence public opinion in other nations and thereby build this aspect of its soft power?'

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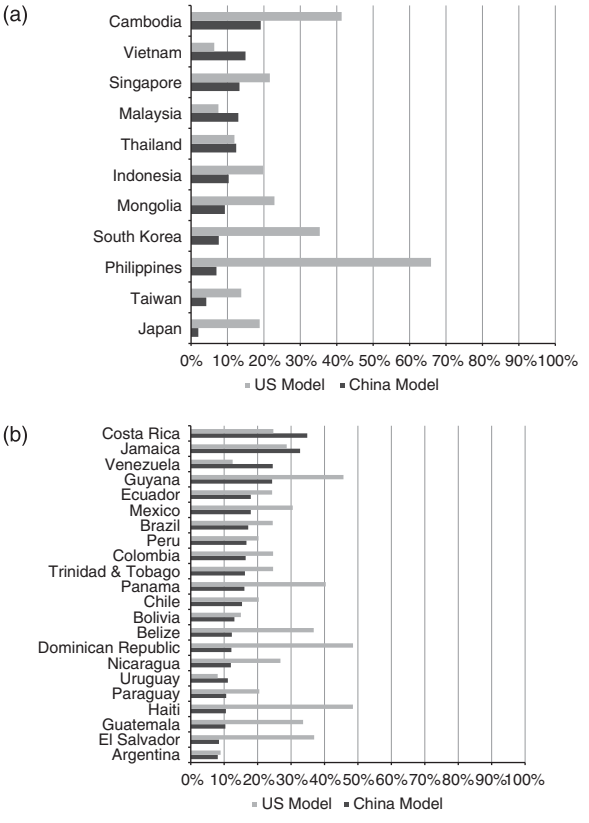

Figure 6. Perceptions of China versus the US as a model of development. (a) Various East Asian societies (2005–2008). (b) Various Latin American Societies.

China Builds Good Will via Advertising

The PRC has made at least one direct, immediate attempt to build support in the American public, running an advertising campaign in the US. These films/advertisements presented an attractive image of China and its people for the purpose of developing a more positive image of the country among the American public.[17] We, with others, used these ads to run an experiment, in which about 1300 respondents were randomly divided into four groups.[18] We present here results concerning the first two groups – a control group who saw nothing and the experimental group who saw the ad almost exactly as it ran in the US media.[19] The subjects in the experiment are not a representative sample, but they are a diverse group of Americans from all walks of life.[20] Those randomly assigned to the experimental 'treatment' watched the ad and then responded to the thermometer evaluation and the eight dimensional evaluation questions about China as discussed earlier in this essay, among other questions. Those randomly assigned to the control group did not see the ad at all but moved directly to respond to these and the other questions.

Figure 7 shows our results of the experiment data. The first bar indicates that the thermometer evaluation of China for the experimental group was about seven points

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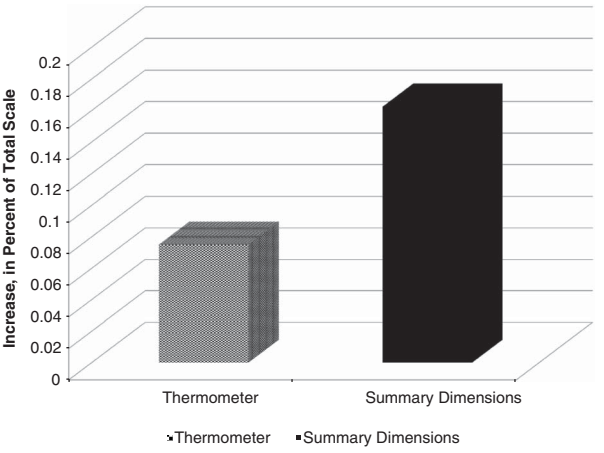

Figure 7. Watching China's ad: an experiment in the US (2012). Difference increase in percentage of total scale between experimental and control groups. US data (two measures, 2012)

more favorable, which, given that the control group averaged a 44 point score, is about 13% of the total possible increase. The second bar is a composite of the eight dimensions of evaluation, and seeing the ad increased those evaluations by about 16%. For a single 30 second viewing, these magnitudes are very large. Because this was designed as a true experiment, we are confident that it was watching the ad, *per se*, that was the true cause of these documented effects. Thus, we conclude that there is a great deal of room for China to act so as to increase its image in a positive direction. Of course, as we consider in the next section, a Chinese advertising campaign is far from the only source of influence over how the public evaluates the rising China.

National and Partisan Differences in Views about China

Views about other nations are a subject that attracts a great deal of attention among politicians and many others in public debates and national discourses. In the tensions between the US and Venezuela, the late President, Hugo Chavez, often pointed to the PRC, Cuba, and others as superior role models for Venezuela than the US. And as we saw above, his encouragement might indeed have convinced many Venezuelans of the greater attraction of the China model. There are, in other words, many and varied sources of opinions pressing on citizens around the world, especially as they begin to formulate impressions and reach evaluations about an emerging power such as China. And, of course, what China does matters a great deal. Is it investing in economic development, as in Brazil? Are there worries that it is simply using African nations to extract raw materials? When it does invest, does it build strong social relations with the local population or does it spoil the environment or in other ways leave negative impressions? In other words, there are many and varied sources of information that may impinge upon impression formation; and these may complement or contradict Chinese attempts at building soft power in these ways.

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We conclude by showing differences of this sort within our three data sets. While the previous section presented an experiment and was thus able to conclude that China's ad truly did cause an increase in warm feelings toward China, here we look at differences among societies or partisan groups within a nation. We will not be able to say that the observed differences are caused by any one particular reason. Differences between societies or partisan groups are too rich and intertwined to be able to identify what in particular explains the observed differences. Unlike the experiment, however, we can be sure that the differences we observe are those to be found in the actual population of the relevant nations, given that these were high quality, randomized samples drawn in each nation. Our point is that there are large differences and, thus, to the extent that China seeks to increase its popular following, its success will be limited by the complex of forces that has yielded the observed differentiation.

In Figure 8 we compare nations within East Asia and within Latin America on our three central measures of evaluation. In East Asia, we contrast nations in the northeast with those of the southeast. In Latin America, we compare nations that signed on to the organization known as ALBA, pioneered by Hugo Chavez, then President of Venezuela.[21] Southeast Asia and ALBA nations are more likely to believe that China is doing more good than harm to their respective regions, and are more likely to think that China is a good model and less likely to think the US is than their regional counterparts. On occasion, these differences are quite large.

In Figure 9 we provide two indications that Republican partisans in the US are more negatively disposed to China than are Democrats. In particular, we illustrate this with the distribution of responses by partisans to the overall feeling thermometer and to the question about how well 'dodging their responsibility in the world' describes China. The latter was picked because it is the strongest of the partisan divides among the eight questions. It could be that the Republican identifiers in the American electorate have long been more negatively disposed toward the PRC than have been Democrats. Or, it could be that the observed differences reflect a more anti-China campaign by the Republican Party and its candidates. Or, of course, it could reflect both.

The general conclusion is that there are many, and likely deep, currents of influences that shape the evaluations of China. It may well be that, for example, the partisan divisions are there because American politicians have found it convenient to use China as a target to win votes to their side, not because of any particular feelings they may truly have about China but only because it is useful in their domestic campaign for votes. Similarly, ALBA was formed to be a political counterweight to the US, and we are simply observing that the many and varied reasons for forming ALBA in the first place are manifested in their public opinion in many ways, including how they view a rising China.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the Chinese government, these data indicate that China is emerging as a recognized, cognized, and evaluated nation, joining with long-time world powers in this regard. To be sure, attitudes and evaluations are still forming. Our evidence indicates, however, that these impressions are rich and complex, and

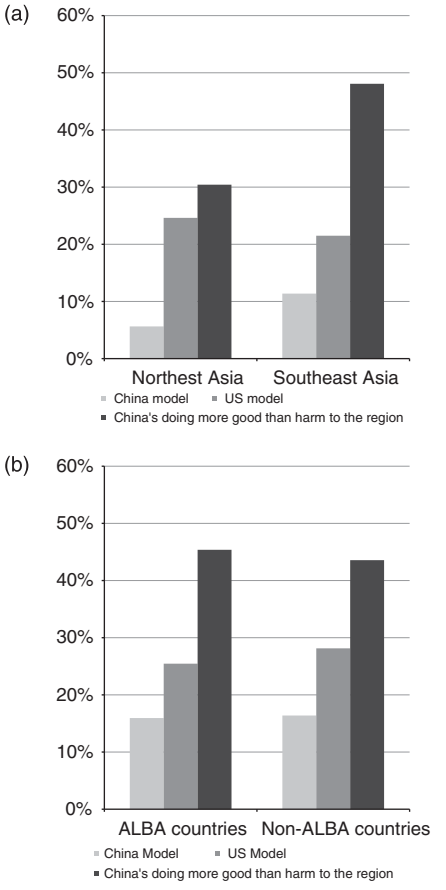

Figure 8. Differences among nations in views about China. (a) Comparing views of China in East Asian societies (2005–2008). Northeast Asia versus Southeast Asia. (b) Comparing views of China in Latin American societies (2012). ALBA countries versus non-ALBA countries.

that, at least from the experimental data from the US, such attitudes are about as well formed as many others, including major domestic public policies.

China nonetheless has a long way to go. From the PRC's perspective, it has considerable work to do in securing positive overall evaluations, comparable to those nations China undoubtedly sees as its competitors in this regard. Even more importantly, it is the rare case in which national publics believe the PRC is a strong candidate for modeling their own political system, and China is, on average, well behind even the US by this measure.

Our evidence further shows that China retains some degree of control in shaping how publics around the world view its nation. China is not, however, alone in seeking to shape how others see it. China appears often to be used by political elites elsewhere for those elites' own domestic purposes, indicating that China must compete with local politics in developing at least this aspect of its soft power.

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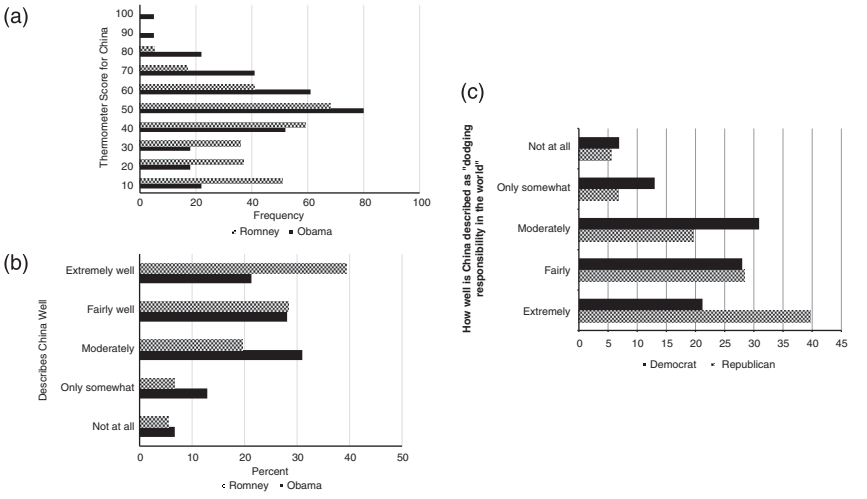

Figure 9. Partisan differences about China among US voters (2012). (a) Feeling towards China among Obama and Romney voters, 2012. (b) Percentage responding that China has been dodging responsibility in the world among Obama and Romney voters. (c) China has been dodging responsibility in the world.

Notes and References

1. For coverage of Hu Jintao's call for development of China's soft power around the world, see http://english.gov.cn/2007-10/15/content_776453.htm. At the website is written: 'While charting ambitious goals of economic and social developments for the 1.3 billion people in the next five years and by 2020, Hu Jintao also stressed the need to enhance Chinese culture as the country's "soft power" in his keynote speech to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Monday.' 'Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength,' Hu said on behalf of the 16th CPC Central Committee.
2. See http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/
3. Societies included here were interviewed in 2005 or 2006. See ww.asianbaro meter.org.
4. Consider two explanations about the relative lack of sophisticated capabilities in the public compared with political elites. One is that the public has a lesser stock of information in memory, so that new information is harder to process and make sense of. The other is simply that they are less interested in and involved in politics than the political elites and therefore pay less attention to political information. Our data are agnostic between the two.
5. B. Berelson, P. Lazarsfeld, and W. McPhee (1986 [1954]) *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
6. G. Almond (1950) *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harcourt Brace).
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8. J. Aldrich, J. Sullivan and E. Borgida (1989) Foreign affairs and issue voting: do presidential candidates "waltz before a blind audience?" *American Political Science Review*, **83**, 123–141.
9. B. Page and R. Shapiro (2010 [1992]) *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
10. R. Erikson, M. MacKuen and J. Stimson (2002) *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
11. V. Key and M. Cummings (1966) *The Responsible Electorate* (New York: Vintage Books).
12. Three questions with identical wording were used in the ABS and LAPOP surveys. These questions asked about respondents' evaluations of China's influence on their region (i.e., good or bad in nature) and their respective countries (i.e., magnitude, and good or bad in nature).
13. These two sets of surveys were conducted by different firms, so that there might be some 'house effect' that might affect responses, particularly with respect to the 'don't know' options.
14. We did not report the 'don't know' data for these questions, because they were asked in a very different fashion, one that discouraged reporting the absence of opinion. Indeed, while there is real variation across these eight questions in that regard, often less than 2% volunteered that they did not have an opinion.
15. P. Converse (1964) The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In: D. Apter (Ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe), pp. 206–261.
16. P. Converse and G. Markus (1979) Plus ca change...: The new CPS election study panel. *American Political Science Review*, **73**, pp. 32–49.
17. The campaign included a set of short advertisements that were drawn from a longer film intended (and actually shown nationally) as a 'documentary' for a half-hour time slot. We used the advertisement version, which included music but no voice-over and minimal text.
18. J. Aldrich, L. Frankel, K. Liu, J. Lu and J. Park (2012) U.S. perceptions and changing opinions of China: evaluations and psychological mechanisms. Paper delivered at the *70th Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association*, Chicago, IL.
19. The ad can be seen at http://youtu.be/VudyvL9aYYo. The version used in the experiment was of higher quality.
20. We pooled two sets of subjects in the results reported here (because they did pool in the statistical sense). One is a small number of Duke undergraduates. Most were from the general public, opting in to a feature of Amazon called 'mechanical Turk', from which the set of subjects actually employed further opted in to participate in our experiment.
21. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) is an organization of nations from Latin America and the Caribbean, founded by then Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, including the nations of Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Venezuela.

About the Authors

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