

CHINA'S NARRATIVES REGARDING THE WEST DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the basic position taken up by the Chinese government and media regarding the current status of the West: specifically, the United States, and the European Union. The first section addresses the questions of how the West, with its concept of human rights, is perceived in Mainland China. The second part presents a more detailed analysis of the United States' image in the People's Republic of China's media as well as official speeches and then discusses how the European Union is viewed. The final part argues that due to the negative feelings among the Chinese youth of the "one-child generation", the Chinese government, to legitimize its power, feels obliged to shape more assertive narratives and actions in foreign policy.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The whole concept of the West is mainly discussed in China through the lenses of the liberal human rights concept and their absence in the Global South.
2. The United States is portrayed from the perspective of the “three diseases”: ineffective pandemic management, the bankruptcy of cultural attractiveness and being the hegemon in the international arena.
3. The image of the European Union is mainly based on its position vis a vis the United States and problems with immigrants/refugees. However, the Chinese side does acknowledge the economic strength of the European countries.
4. The overall negative picture is derived from the fact that currently, the Chinese government manages a population which is partly made up of the “one-child generation”, dubbed “little emperors”, who grew up in very favorable, but overprotective conditions and who have to meet very high expectations of young Chinese people.

INTRODUCTION

The then vice president of China, Xi Jinping, when visiting the United States in 2012, declared that “when it comes to human rights there is always room for discussion”. (Xi Jinping 2012) However, this statement is now no longer valid. These days, China’s assertiveness, which to a certain degree is very natural behaviour for a rising power, means that it now challenges Western liberal values. To analyse Sino-Western relations, it is vitally important to identify the Chinese government and the media’s basic arguments and interpret the meaning of their prescribed picture of the West. In other words, the paper addresses the following questions: what is the general image of the West presented to domestic as well as international audiences, and what are the roots (origins) of the negative portrayal of the United States, the European Union, and the West in general?

DESCRIBING THE WEST AND ITS HUMAN RIGHTS

Chinese news media has never specified what constitutes the “West”, but the tone has been harsh and the criticism relentless. Reading between the lines, we can derive that the West, according to Chinese government statements and the media, loosely comprises the US, EU, the UK, NATO, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. This formation of the West is painted as a group that sets blatant double standards regarding China: while criticizing China’s dismal human rights record, oppression in Tibet and alleged genocide in Xinjiang, the West has invaded and subverted different sovereign states across the globe and are equally at fault in terms of human rights. In contrast, China describes itself as a righteous but embattled state that is willing to defy the western liberal world order and stay true to its definition of “human rights”.

Much of China’s rhetoric against the “West” is related to human rights. They reiterate the point that the West’s hypocrisy makes it unfit to authoritatively define human rights and has no right to lecture the Chinese. On the other hand, China’s reworked definition that stresses economic security and order, as Beijing’s media portrays, is being adopted by politically like-minded states such as Venezuela, Belarus, and Russia.

Domestically, the Chinese media portrays Chinese citizens as gradually gaining the confidence to view the West on an equal footing or even from a superior position.

The “China Voice” (Zhong sheng) in the “People’s Daily” (2021), while interpreting human rights, said that it is not the privilege of a selected few countries, and definitely cannot be a tool to pressure and intervene in domestic affairs. The promotion of human rights by a small group of Western countries shows these countries’ hegemonic mindset, as well as their inner weakness and anxiety in the face of a century of global change. Portraying Western voices on human rights as a “minority” in global affairs, China positions itself as the leader in the area of reinterpreting Western concepts.

Moreover, as mentioned by Wang Yi (2021), *If some Western countries deliberately suppress developing nations in the name of human rights, and strip the right to develop from non-Western states, this will become the biggest injustice in the history of human progress.*

This narrative was supported by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Wang Wenbin (2021), who denied the Western accusation of China engaging in “megaphone diplomacy” and intervening in others’ domestic issues. This typical double standard, Wang Wenbin went on to say, shows the West’s ingrained sense of pride, prejudice, and hypocrisy.

THE UNITED STATES AS A BANKRUPT POWER

The United States’ image in China is mainly drawn from three areas: international policy of hegemony which is partially implemented through competition with China, the USA’s domestic problems with managing Covid-19, and cultural bankruptcy. In general, the Chinese media has presented America as a restive, paranoid and morally challenged hegemon, causing most of the world’s problems in a bid to create issues that sustain its gradually fading power. China’s narrative posits that the USA lacks the assurance established by the post-Cold War liberal power, with the country relying on its ability to undermine China and other peacefully rising nations, including its allies, to underpin its sense of security.

China’s depiction of the US links it with different prevailing international relation problems, from fake news to foreign regime change as well as emphasizing China’s responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the eyes of the Chinese media, America threatens its status from within. As stated in an August 2021 editorial in the People’s Daily newspaper, “The US’ greatest enemy is the US itself”. The Chinese side declared that China’s development has never been built upon the US’ decline and Washington is only obsessed with portraying China as a ‘potential enemy’ and setting US-China relations on a collision course. The reason the US has kept using the pandemic as an excuse to spread rumours and to talk ill of China is that some Americans cannot accept the fact that China has become a powerful nation. Such behaviour from the US, the newspaper stated, has once again broadened our known understanding of an American hegemon while exposing the blatant ignorance the US has about the world’s latest developments.

The editorial then states that it seems the US has forgotten that it is facing the world's second-largest economy that is determined, strong-willed and capable of defending its sovereignty and border integrity. The American policy is also the driving force behind China's policy of community with a shared future for mankind and bringing new opportunities to the world through its developments. Until now, around 60 countries have written to the WTO in recognition of the first phase of COVID-19 origin tracing and oppose the conspiracy to politicize this progress. In a matter of days, over 12 million Chinese netizens have signed a petition to urge the WHO to start an investigation into the US being the origin of COVID-19, and which is a testament to global public opinion (People's Daily 2021b).

At the same time, the US society is described by the Chinese media as being corrupt and on the brink of collapse. China has accused the US of contaminating the Chinese youth with its "efficacy" culture, rendering Chinese men incapable of managing themselves or being potentially effective in a wartime situation. The US is portrayed as a lazy, depraved and morally confused nation, riddled with social problems, hate crimes, political scandal, and internal conflicts, and is no match for the socialist-driven and razor-sharp China under the CCP (People's Daily 2021b).

Moreover, the problem with racism and gun violence was also discussed by the Chinese media. The number of guns and gun violence have long troubled US society, but special interest groups led by the NRA have nullified efforts on regulating the proliferation of weapons through funding sympathetic political candidates and lobbying. Extortionate drug prices set by US pharmaceuticals has also hurt the public, and the increasing amount of money in politics have turned the US government into a mouthpiece of the rich. This makes bridging the wealth gap all but impossible (Xinhua 2021b).

Consequently, the US is portrayed as the leader of this cultural sabotage, responsible for erecting obstacles in the fields of economics, technology, finance, politics and diplomacy, and assaulting China on biological (probably referring to COVID-19), telecommunication networks (probably referring to Huawei), public opinion and space, with the help of domestic fifth columnists. The theme is that if the CCP does not resist through hardline socialist politics, the US will sabotage China as it did with the USSR.

THE EUROPEAN UNION: STILL AN ECONOMIC POWER?

Compared to the rhetoric employed against the US, the Chinese official media is relatively kinder to the EU, which in Beijing's geopolitical calculation is not a completely opposing nor irreconcilable entity.

While Chinese media condemns the EU for disagreeing with fundamental CCP policies such as the one-China policy toward deepening cooperation with Taiwan or portraying EU member states as being caught in a quagmire of a refugee influx, it nonetheless portrays the entity as an essential trading partner and potentially willing to abandon the US-led world order so that it can set itself on a new path.

Sina's news service has also compared the EU's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic with the US', signalling that the US is falling behind and is an unreliable partner for the Europeans (Sina 2021). This conflicting picture, Sina says, shows the animosity in the Transatlantic relations. Sina's commentary continues, "even though the EU gave the US preferential treatment, the US never returned the favour". In this context, American policy "was too much for the Europeans". After the Council of the European Union delisted the US from its 'safe list', some European netizens commented "we have finally got rid of the US. The virus is all over America and they still don't return the favour." A netizen nicknamed 'EU lady' said "the Americans never let Europeans in. Not even the vaccinated ones, now that's humiliating." (Sina 2021).

The second important subject in the Chinese media is how it describes the European humanitarian crisis. The analyses have shown that unrest in the Middle East and parts of Africa have continued and has become one of the reasons behind the surge of immigrants into the EU. According to surveys by organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, armed clashes in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region has meant 50,000 displaced Ethiopians have crossed over the border into Sudan. Last year, the Yemen's civil war also displaced over 160,000 people, with the Yemeni city of Marib alone seeing 12,000 families being forced to flee (People's Daily, 2021c).

From an economic point of view, however, China recognizes the importance of the European Union as a trading partner. As said by Xinhua Press Agency, figures show that

in the first half of 2021, the EU's gross export value stood at EUR1,048.9 billion, an increase of 13.8% year-on-year. The EU's total import volume reached EUR964.5 billion, a year-on-year increase of 13.9%. Within these numbers, the EU exported EUR112.6 billion worth of goods to China and imported EUR210.2 billion from the PRC, marking a 20.2% and 15.5% increase respectively (Xinhua 2021c).

The Chinese media also raised the question of Taiwan in Sino-European relations. The People's Republic of China is the only legitimate government that solely represents China. Taiwan is an inseparable part of Chinese territory, which is a well-recognized principle in international relations and is also part of a global consensus. It is also the political foundation for any bilateral developments between China and Europe. In various documents and statements declared by China and the EU, the Europeans have consistently backed the "One China" policy.

The People's Daily states that the EU's words must match international rules, and since the European Parliament is a key institution of the EU, it should honor its own pledge and make efforts in supporting and implementing the promise of supporting the "One China" policy. (People's Daily 2021e).

CONCLUSIONS

On the one hand, the stances that the Chinese take should be seen through the foreign policy lens. Contrary to the United States, the European Union still enjoys a quasi-positive image, that has resulted in practical political considerations. The EU and Western countries such as France and Germany play an important role in China's policy towards the West. But taking a closer look into Chinese domestic affairs, the situation seems to be different.

We need to acknowledge that the government in China trying to manage a state of younger people who are predominantly part of the "little emperor generation". According to a survey published by "Global Times" (2021), young people in China are not particularly interested in Western values, education, or political systems. On the question 'if budget permits, what would you most want to do in the West?': 54.6% of respondents answered 'travel', only 10.9% answered 'study', while 25.9% answered 'not interested in the West'.

For those who picked 'travel' and 'study', 53.8% and 31.8%, respectively, they said that their 'willingness to do this had decreased'. Asked about the strengths and weaknesses of China and the West and 'in what aspects do you believe that China has surpassed the West?': 60.3% of respondents chose 'social law and order', 57.1% said 'respect for human rights and 35% chose 'history and culture'. These three aspects also rank top in what the Chinese youth believe Western countries can learn from China's experience.

To a certain degree the government, by using the 50 Cent Army, a government sponsored internet group established to stimulate public debate, has indeed shaped public opinion. However, despite this general public 'safety valve', the above discussed social phenomena of the "one-child generation" has created a rather unique situation. To prove its legitimacy, the Communist Party of China needs to control and follow public sentiment as illustrated in the abovementioned survey results and create an aggressive narrative towards the West. If it does not, it may face popular unrest and may be accused of not defending the legitimate interest of the Chinese people. So, the central government's current assertiveness in fact reflects the general public's opinion regarding these matters.

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