

Chinese views of the United States: evidence from Weibo

Yichen Guan¹, Dustin Tingley^{1,*},
David Romney¹, Amaney Jamal² and
Robert Keohane³

¹*Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA;* ²*Department of Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA;* ³*Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA*
*Email: dtingley@gov.harvard.edu

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Abstract

We study Chinese attitudes toward the United States, and secondarily toward Japan, Russia, and Vietnam, by analyzing social media discourse on the Chinese social media site, Weibo. We focus separately on a general analysis of attitudes and on Chinese responses to specific international events involving the United States. In general, we find that Chinese netizens are much more interested in US politics than US society. Their views of the United States are characterized by deep ambivalence; they have remarkably favorable attitudes toward many aspects of US influence, whether economic, political, intellectual, or cultural. Attitudes toward the United States become negative when the focus turns to US foreign policy – actions that Chinese netizens view as antithetical to Chinese interests. On the contrary, attitudes toward Japan, Russia, and Vietnam vary a great deal from one another. The contrast

between these differentiated Chinese views toward the United States and other countries, on the one hand, and the predominant anti-Americanism in the Middle East, on the other, is striking.

1 Introduction

In this article we use evidence from the Chinese equivalent of Twitter – Weibo – to show that Chinese views of the United States are characterized by deep ambivalence. On some dimensions, Chinese views of the United States are intensely negative, but in other respects they are remarkably positive. To Chinese users of Weibo, the West can serve simultaneously as a model for success and as a threat to national ambitions. The political, economic, intellectual, and cultural contributions of Western nations have been the object of both emulation and rejection by the Chinese people and government. On the one hand, the US institutional infrastructure has been an influential model for China's economic liberation over the past three decades. The Chinese have embraced many US values such as individualism and materialism during the cause of the economic reform. On the other hand, most Chinese today, including the young, are hostile toward American foreign policy in the Asia Pacific region. US foreign policy runs counter to intense Chinese nationalism.

In this article, we contribute to the descriptive literature on Chinese views of the United States by looking at contemporary Chinese attitudes as expressed on social media. Earlier work has predominantly focused on public opinion surveys. Throughout the world, social media has become another mechanism for discourse, and this article leverages this technological innovation. We use the social media analytics company Crimson Hexagon to analyze user posts from Weibo, the most popular Chinese social media site. This technology enables us to observe Chinese attitudes toward the United States at a general level as well as the Chinese public's responses to specific events. Based on the Weibo data we collected from 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2013, we find that Chinese express positive views of US domestic political conditions, an attitude that is rooted in converging value systems, rising favorability toward democracy, and admiration of US economic and technological advancement. On the contrary, Chinese express negative sentiments when it comes to interactions between the two countries in

the international arena and are ambivalent about US influence in world affairs.

In Section 2, we discuss earlier work on Chinese sentiment toward the United States. Section 3 explains how our research design and methodology enable us to analyze Chinese Weibo posts about the United States. Section 4 analyzes general discourses on Weibo about the United States and China's neighboring countries. In Section 5, we examine Weibo data following specific events involving the United States: responses to US involvement in the territorial disputes between China and the Philippines and the North Korean nuclear crisis. Section 6 contrasts our findings with earlier work using social media data in the Middle East and discusses some ideas about resolving the puzzles that emerge. Section 7 concludes the article.

2 Public opinion in China

Thus far, studies of Chinese views about the United States have relied mainly on surveys and public opinion polls. One of the best works in this tradition is the book chapter by Johnston and Stockmann (2007), which looks at Chinese attitudes toward the United States across time and issue areas. Based on survey data collected by the Beijing Area Study in 2004, the authors conclude that Chinese attitudes toward American foreign policy were substantially negative at the “official, media, intellectual, and mass” levels. In addition, they find a pattern of increasing anti-Americanism over time in their data. These findings mirror those from a poll conducted by BBC World Service Poll in 2007. According to this poll, the majority of Chinese respondents (52%) had a negative view of US influence in world affairs in general. More specifically, an overwhelming 83% of the respondents showed dissatisfaction with the way the US government handled the Iraq War, whereas 66% did not like the role the United States played in the Israel–Hezbollah conflict. Moreover, most Chinese (72%) saw US military presence in the Middle East as “provoking more conflict than it prevents”.¹

1 In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015, a majority of Chinese (54%) said the United States was trying to prevent China from becoming as powerful as the U.S.

Although the sparsity of polls and variety of polling methods can make it difficult to map trends over time, a report by the [Pew Research Center \(2012\)](#) contains results from two polls, one conducted in 2010 and the other in 2012. According to the report, in 2010, Chinese views of the United States had been remarkably positive, with 68% of respondents seeing the relationship between China and the United States as cooperative. By 2012, however, the picture had become more mixed. The Chinese public overall held “mixed or negative views” of major world powers and international institutions such as the United Nations and European Union, and these views had become more negative over time, such that only 39% of the Chinese respondents viewed the relationship between China and the United States as cooperative. Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents who saw the relationship between China and the United States as ‘one of hostility’ had also increased, from 8% in 2010 to 26% in 2012. Chinese views of the United States generally were also mixed in 2012, as 43% held a favorable view of the United States and 38% were confident in the Obama administration’s ability to deal with international affairs in a right way. Both these numbers had dropped sharply from 2010. However, although Chinese attitudes on US influence in world affairs were generally negative, Chinese views about domestic society were predominantly positive. In the same report by the [Pew Research Center \(2012\)](#), 73% of the respondents expressed their admiration for US technological and scientific advances and more than half of the respondents (52%) favored American ideas about democracy.

The three studies reviewed so far originate from Western sources, but surveys conducted by Chinese scholars and institutions also reveal very mixed views of the United States. A survey conducted by the Institute of American Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 18 cities from 16 provinces in 2008 reported that 23.53% of respondents had bad overall impressions about the United States, whereas 15.58% reported a favorable attitude toward the country. The rest of the respondents (51.55%) reported their general impression about the United States as “so-so”. However, when asked for their first impression of the country, more than half of respondents reported positive feelings that were associated with US social and political character, including its democratic values and economic development. Furthermore, 34.5% of Chinese youths aged 15 to 29 reported that

they saw the United States as a powerful and rich country and 27.6% of them described their first impression of the United States as democratic and diverse, which are both positive descriptions in the Chinese language. But consistent with the findings in the Western studies, respondents' first impressions became quite negative when thinking about the way the US government handled international affairs: 28.7% of the respondents saw the US government as arrogant, whereas another 17.8% described the country as the "world police".

Finally, survey results presented by Chinese survey companies and news agencies show similar results. In a survey conducted by the Horizon Research Consultancy Group and China Daily in 2010, 1,443 randomly selected Chinese adults in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Shenyang, and Xi'an completed questionnaires through Computer-Assistant Telephone Interviewing. According to the survey results, Chinese impressions of the United States ranked second worst among all major powers of the world in 2010, better only than Japan. Since the Horizon Research Consultancy Group conducted the same kind of survey every year from 2001 to 2009, a comparison across time is also available. Results show that the level of Chinese favorability toward the United States experienced three phases in the last decade. In the first half of the last decade, from 2001 to 2005, the level of favorability remained steady (around 43%), despite negative world reactions to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the following four years, between 2005 to 2009, the level of Chinese favorability increased significantly and reached a peak in 2009 (65.61%). However, the level of Chinese favorability toward the United States dropped significantly from 2009 to 2010 (48.8%) as a result of disputes between the two countries over the issues of Taiwan and Tibet.

The existing literature on Chinese attitudes toward the West offers two explanations for Chinese anti-American sentiment. First, the 'century of humiliation' historical memory appears to be the prism through which the Chinese have viewed U.S. foreign policies since the term arose in 1915 (Wang, 2008). The use of the term 'century of humiliation' in the Chinese Communist Party's historiography and the patriotic education campaign further invoked modern Chinese nationalism by focusing on sovereignty and integrity of territory (Callahan, 2004; Woods and Dickson, 2017). A second explanation for the anti-Americanism in China holds that levels of anti-American sentiment

reflect macro q();negative views of U.S. hegemony in global affairs and U.S. foreign policies in the region. Incidents such as the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the Hainan Island incident, and protests for Tibetan independence along the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay, as well as U.S. support of Taiwan and other allies in the region that have territorial disputes with China, all serve to provoke anti-American sentiment among the Chinese (O'Connor and Griffiths, 2007).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, Chinese views of the United States are not entirely negative. There is some positive sentiment and Chinese views as reported in surveys are quite mixed. To present a clearer summary of existing findings, we find that two dimensions help us distinguish Chinese views of the United States: i) social vs. political content; and ii) the US influence in world affairs vs. US domestic issues. Table 1 presents the most important results from previous surveys and policy analyses.

In summary, based on the survey data, Chinese attitudes toward the United States are differentiated depending on the focus of the question. These opinions tend to be most negative toward to US foreign policy and its position of influence in world affairs. In both the social domain and US domestic politics, Chinese showed strong favorability toward US values, technology, and culture.

3 Social media discourse as a window into views of the United States

3.1 Background

Survey data is nonetheless limited in its ability to present a full picture of the attitudes of a population. First, how survey questions are framed matters; and they do not measure intensity of feeling: most respondents may not feel strongly about some topics. Furthermore, since surveys are expensive, they are relatively infrequent. In contrast, social media postings occur continuously and represent the spontaneous expression of users about events as they happen. Thus, although the Chinese public opinion surveys described above are useful in providing a rough

Table 1 Summary of existing findings

	US influence in world affairs	US domestic characteristics
Political	Overwhelmingly negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• US interference in Chinese politics (Taiwan and Tibet).• US blocks China from development.• US foreign policy in general.	Overwhelmingly positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Admiration for US political institutions.• Admiration for US economic development.• Admiration for US democratic values.
Social	Overwhelmingly positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive views of the spread of American culture.• Fondness for American products.	Overwhelmingly positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Admiration for American lifestyle.• Admiration for US technological and scientific advances.

picture of how Chinese people view the United States, we can gain a more nuanced analysis by also using social media data.

Since its introduction to China in 1994, the internet has become an increasingly attractive way for the Chinese public to engage with social and political issues. A rapidly growing number of Chinese citizens rely on social media to obtain information and entertainment, express opinions about ongoing events, and even engage in political participation such as organizing strikes and demonstrations. As a result, scholars have recently paid increasing attention to the role of social media as a window into Chinese perceptions of foreign countries and international relations.

Social media in China have served as a platform for the upsurge of popular nationalist sentiment. In China, nationalism is both a “top-down” and a “bottom-up” phenomenon. On the one hand, the government promotes patriotism and nationalism through ideological and political education from primary school through graduate studies, media propaganda, and even entertainment such as the Spring Festival Gala. On the other hand, expression of nationalism is a spontaneous response of the population to perceived threats to China’s national interests. The numerous online discussions advocating China’s use of force against neighboring countries and western powers reflect

widespread public views. Therefore, although guided and encouraged by the authorities to some degree, online nationalism is not something that is designed or dictated by the government, but is a product of voluntary popular debate (Breslin and Shen, 2010; Cheng, 2013).

In this public sphere, some countries have received more attention from China's online communities than others. Because of its significant role in international affairs and cultural influence, the United States has received the closest scrutiny from Chinese netizens. Perhaps unsurprisingly, expressions of anti-American sentiment are widespread. Popular online forums such as strong country (强国) are even specifically set up to articulate anti-US opinions (Breslin and Shen, 2010; Cheng, 2013).

Although a growing body of research has been relying on Weibo data to analyze Chinese politics with a specific focus on the censorship mechanisms, the Chinese regime has developed to manage its rumor control strategies (Chan and Fu, 2017; King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Zeng), no scholarly work on anti-Americanism has used Weibo posts as the basis for its analysis. The only article that uses similar methodology to understand anti-Americanism is Jamal et al. (2015), which uses Twitter as its data source. The only article using Weibo discourses to understand Chinese nationalism is Obern (2013)'s excellent article on Chinese attitudes toward the Diaoyu Islands dispute protest. By looking at online and offline public attitudes toward the Diaoyu Islands Dispute, Obern argues that Weibo helps form an alternative nationalism that is different from the national propaganda because it involves individuals' critical thinking.

3.2 Weibo

Microblogging is one of the most successful forms of social media. Since its creation, it has altered the ways people perceive and process online information (Tong and Lei, 2013). Detailed news reports supported by in-depth interviews and deep analysis are now supplemented by short news postings on microblogging websites such as Twitter. This method of quick engagement with friends and strangers in online communities has complemented or even subverted previous modes of communicating (Obern, 2013).

Sina Weibo emerged as a Chinese version of Twitter in 2009. It soon became one of the most popular social media sites in China, giving Chinese netizens a platform from which to consume information in a new way as well as record their daily lives, opinions, and comments on social and political events. Similar to Twitter, Weibo features rapid communication and hyper-interactivity. With a word limit of 140, Weibo encourages people to spread stories in an efficient and catchy way. Moreover, as on Twitter, Weibo users can also comment on news, photos, videos, and music from external sources by sharing links or hashtagging the trending topics. In this way, by posting and reposting the entries, Weibo becomes an open community that interacts with other online communities that have an interest in the same topic.

Weibo's influence stems partly from the huge numbers of users involved, which has drawn the attention of both the Chinese government and social scientists. As of December 2012, Weibo had more than 500 million account holders, who tended to come from the ranks of the well-educated upper-middle class. Of the account holders, around 198 million were active users – users who stayed logged in their Weibo accounts through various means. About 100 million messages were posted on this microblogging website each day.² By the end of March 2015, daily active users of Weibo reached 66.6 million and monthly active users reached an astonishing 143.8 million.³ Probably due to the fact that Twitter and Facebook are both blocked in China, Weibo has become a unique center for lively discussion of political and social events as well as personal lives.

We do not claim that our data reflect Chinese attitudes in a perfectly representative sense. Participants on Weibo do not constitute a random sample of any identifiable population. As Weibo users are usually identified with the more educated and more liberal communities in China, who are more exposed to Western influence, our findings might not represent lower-class Chinese views about the United States. We also recognize that people with stronger attitudes are also more likely to post on social media platforms than those hold neutral views and

2 Josh Ong (2013-02-21). 'China's Sina Weibo grew 73% in 2012, passing 500 million registered accounts.' <https://thenextweb.com/asia/2013/02/21/chinas-sina-weibo-grew-73-in-2012-passing-500-million-registered-accounts/> (30 July 2018, date last accessed).

3 CIW Team (2015-12-22). 'Weibo Search Users Insights 2015'. <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/tag/sina-weibo/> (30 July 2018, date last accessed).

indifferent attitudes. However, active Weibo users are not a tiny portion of Chinese netizens: according to China Internet Watch, the number of Weibo monthly active users had reached 222 million as of September 2015, which was nearly a third of the total number of Chinese netizens (668 million).⁴ Therefore, although Weibo discourses might be distinctive and not necessarily representative of mass public attitudes, they are clearly increasingly important as a medium of expression and communication, especially for citizens who are interested in foreign countries. The centrality of Weibo in China makes it probably the best on-line conduit for understanding Chinese views on the United States and politics more generally.

Besides, we recognize that our Weibo data do not always reflect Chinese netizens' original views of domestic and international events. With strict censorship on social media platforms and possible state interference on leading or suppressing nationalistic discussions, the Weibo discourses we observe are products of both spontaneous expression of users and social media use by government. However, the bias caused by state influence is not Weibo specific. In authoritarian regimes where the state apparatus closely monitors and guides people's political and social lives, the distinction between original public opinion and public opinion under the influence of the government is hardly clear. Moreover, while pro-government commentators hired by Chinese authorities, namely the "50 Cent Party", have been manipulating public opinion about domestic politics by distracting the public with coordinated bursts of cheerleading, they are not found to promote narratives that criticize countries that do not share the same values with China, and thus should have little direct impact on shaping people's attitudes toward foreign countries (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017). Therefore, although our study of the Weibo data is not a perfect reflection of Chinese netizens' original views on world events, it is a close approximation of Chinese public opinion about the US and neighboring countries.

Data from Weibo traffic enable us to study how Chinese netizens view other countries. In particular, we are able to use Weibo to learn about Chinese views of the United States. We use a general analysis of

4 CIW Team (2015-12-22). 'Weibo Search Users Insights 2015.' <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/tag/sina-weibo/> (30 July 2018, date last accessed).

posts that mention America but we also focus on Chinese attitudes toward the United States in the context of specific events.

3.3 Research design and methodology

We use Weibo posts gathered and stored by Crimson Hexagon, a social media analytics company founded in 2007, for this analysis. Crimson Hexagon (CH) combines the text analysis method developed by [Hopkins and King \(2010\)](#) with a vast collection of social media data in an online platform. It should be noted that Crimson Hexagon does not collect the universe of Weibo posts, as it does with other social media sources. For the time during which this analysis was conducted, CH used a third party to obtain a sample of Weibo posts from which likely spam and bot accounts were removed. This filtered sample passed on to Crimson Hexagon constituted approximately 1% of the total number of Weibo posts. Although these data are not a random sample, due to the filtering process, there is no reason to expect them to be biased with respect to our research questions as we are focused on human participation on Weibo and not spam generators and bots.

We used a sample of posts sent to Crimson Hexagon from the universe of Weibo data from 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2013 to match the time frame used in an earlier article to analyze anti-Americanism in the Middle East (blinded). After completing the analyses reported in this article, the Chinese government suddenly altered access permissions to the data in September 2015. This cut us off from the raw data and forecloses additional analyses on Crimson Hexagon. Only in late 2016 has Weibo content become available again, and unfortunately the current pricing of this data by Crimson Hexagon forecloses academic use.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, we created structure necessary for our analyses by setting up the basic parameters and keywords restrictions. We used Boolean search logic to define key terms so the software can identify the universe of posts to analyze. Second, in each analysis, we defined categories appropriate to the parameters of the study. Since we are mainly interested in how Chinese view the United States in regard to political and social issues, we defined six basic categories to examine people's attitudes: positive political, neutral political, negative political, positive social, neutral social, and negative social. In

addition, for posts that did not belong to any of these categories, we defined an “Off-topic” category for irrelevant posts and a “News” category for posts by news agencies so that these posts would not affect our analysis of Chinese attitudes. Third, we created a training set – a set of posts pre-defined by the researchers to serve as the basis of supervised text analysis. We manually placed each Weibo post into the appropriate category until we felt that there was sufficient training for our analysis (300–500 total posts).

Finally, when training was complete, we ran the [Hopkins and King \(2010\)](#) inspired algorithm which produces estimates of the proportion of posts belonging to any given category. This allows us to examine how many Weibo users hold positive, neutral, or negative views of the United States. In addition, we also have access to the estimated volume of posts in each of the categories and a list of example posts.

4 General Chinese attitudes toward the United States and China’s neighboring countries

We begin our analysis by studying Chinese attitudes at the general level. Through a careful analysis of Chinese attitudes toward the United States and three neighboring countries – Russia, Japan, and Vietnam – we observe general trends in Chinese online conversations about these foreign countries.

4.1 General levels of Weibo users’ attitudes

Our first aggregate analysis is called “General Anti-Americanism”. We use this analysis to study views of the United States among Weibo users. With a broad range of keywords associated with the United States, 23,097,889 relevant posts were classified in one of the six substantive categories.

The results, shown in [Table 2](#), are striking: On several dimensions, Chinese Weibo users like the United States! The biggest category in our findings is positive political: posts that focus on political issues and that are positive, overall, toward the United States. In view of the mixed responses in public opinion polls, this result comes as a big surprise. In frequency, the next largest category is neutral political. Together, these categories account for over 90% of posts, a finding that

Table 2 Summary of general levels of anti-Americanism on Weibo

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Social	220,982	1
Neutral Social	178,369	<1
Negative Social	444,987	2
Positive Political	12,211,881	53
Neutral Political	9,932,187	43
Negative Political	109,483	<1

contrasts sharply with the view that Chinese hold negative attitudes about the United States. Other categories—negative political posts and posts about U.S. social issues—together account for less than 6% of the online discourse. This means that Chinese netizens held strikingly positive views about political issues related to the United States. Moreover, besides the ratio of positive responses to negative responses, it is also interesting to find that the volume of political discourse constitutes nearly 96% of the universe of postings, which means that the Chinese were a lot more interested in U.S. politics than U.S. society.

However, as we look more closely at these categories, we find some similarities with findings from public opinion polls, as summarized in [Table 1](#). The majority of the posts in the positive political category were about American domestic politics, where Chinese netizens expressed their admiration for the US political system and the American idea of democracy. This finding is consistent with findings from survey data. Moreover, similar to the survey respondents' reactions, the negative political category was mainly about the negative US influence in the East Pacific region and US interference in China's domestic affairs. Also consistent with polling results, posts in the positive social category expressed fondness for American life, American people, and American culture.

Two new and different sets of findings stand out. A number of posts in the positive social category express strong admiration for US power in the international arena, a sentiment not observed in surveys. We also discovered some negative social posts, focusing mainly on the decreasing strength of the US economy and perceived moral corruption in US society. The negative social category represents new data about Chinese

opinion. Since survey questions have never asked respondents whether they held negative views about US society, survey results have never captured these negative attitudes.

In summary, a comparison between our results and the previous literature reveals, first and most important, much more positive attitudes about the United States than one would expect based on existing surveys. Yet the pattern of issues on which Chinese people were positive or negative was broadly similar to the pattern identified in survey research: Chinese people are most negative about US foreign policy. With our method, however, we can also assess intensity of views, which is not captured by surveys. We show that Weibo users were mostly posting about US domestic politics when they expressed opinions about the United States. US domestic politics – not foreign policy or the attributes of American society – captures the attention of Chinese Weibo users.

4.2 General attitudes toward neighboring countries

Although our results from the Weibo data provide new insight to our understanding of Chinese attitudes toward the United States, they also raise an important question: how different are these views from Chinese attitudes toward other countries? Do the Chinese view neighboring countries in a strikingly different way from a distant power like the United States? To answer this question, we chose three neighboring countries of China for further analysis: Russia, Japan, and Vietnam.

We chose China's neighboring countries because we believed that these countries would be relatively salient to Chinese netizens. These countries have had different relationships with China historically – Russia as a country that has a lot of common interests with China and that often coordinates policy with China; Japan as a country that has close cultural ties but a dark history with China; and Vietnam as a country that has a turbulent relationship with China, despite their common socialist background. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how Weibo users' views differ across these countries.

With the same time frame and a similar selection of keywords, we created and trained three separate analyses for Russia, Japan, and Vietnam. The analyses collected 24,783,452, 34,869,973, and 1,179,659 posts about each country, respectively, and classified them in one of the six categories as we did previously. As reflected in Table 3, the findings

Table 3 Chinese attitudes toward neighboring countries

Category	United States		Russia		Japan		Vietnam	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Social	220,982	1	123,847	5	15,372,788	44	118,165	10
Neutral Social	178,369	<1	245,934	10	696,397	2	189,032	16
Negative Social	444,987	2	473,876	19	1,390,813	4	462,739	39
Positive Political	12,211,881	53	817,352	33	0	0	163,512	14
Neutral Political	9,932,187	43	493,726	20	6,977,935	20	94,238	8
Negative Political	109,483	<1	323,610	13	10,432,040	30	151,973	13

suggest that the Chinese held very different views about their neighboring countries than they did about the United States. Moreover, unlike their attitudes toward the United States, the Chinese were not interested only in the politics of these countries, but also in their societies.

From the Russia analysis, we find that the Chinese people in general held very positive views of Russian politics. However, the volume of negative social posts is nearly four times that of positive social posts. A careful reading of the posts reveals that although the Chinese admire Vladimir Putin's ambition and determination, they regard Russians as rude and less civilized than the Chinese.

Results from the Japan analysis are also interesting. In this analysis, the volume of social traffic is equal to political traffic, meaning that people were equally interested in Japanese society as in Japanese politics. This may be because the same cultural roots shared by China and Japan provide a good foundation for comparison on social issues. In addition, many more Chinese have been to Japan than to the United States or Russia, thus they have more first-hand experience on which to base comments about Japanese society than they do of the other two.⁵ Almost half of the posts talked positively about Japanese society and the Japanese people. They described the Japanese people as polite, educated, and respectful. In striking contrast, *no* positive post was identified in our training exercise about Japanese politics or Japanese foreign policies.

Finally, in the Vietnam analysis, as Table 3 shows, the volume of social traffic is nearly twice as great as political traffic. Vietnam is one of the top Chinese travel destinations so many Chinese people have observed Vietnamese society directly. However, the volume of negative social posts is nearly four times that of positive posts. People in general thought of Vietnam as a poor and less developed country with bad infrastructure and ugly buildings. Within the political traffic, however, the volume of positive posts is more than that of negative posts as Chinese Weibo users spoke highly of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign and political reforms in Vietnam.

In summary, our findings suggest that the interest of Weibo users in society and politics of neighboring countries varies. So do their

5 Travel China Guide (2016). 'China Outbound Tourism in 2015.' <https://www.travelchina.guide.com/tourism/2015statistics/outbound.htm> (30 July 2018, date last accessed).

attitudes. Remarkably, a comparison between how Chinese viewed their neighboring countries and the United States shows that despite cultural difference, geopolitical rivalry, and sharp differences in political system, Chinese attitudes toward the United States are, overall, the most positive among the countries we analyzed.

5 Anti-Americanism inspired by specific events

After analyzing general views of United States politics and society, it is interesting to see whether Chinese attitudes toward the United States change when it comes to specific events. In this section, we analyze two main issues that concern both China and the United States: the territorial disputes between China and the Philippines and the North Korean nuclear weapons program. For each, we focused on a particular area of time wherein there was a “flare up” generating what we term an event. These events, especially with respect to the US ally the Philippines, could be especially helpful in surfacing more nationalistic discourse.

5.1 The United States and the territorial disputes between China and the Philippines

The bilateral relationship between China and the Philippines, while historically tense, saw gradual improvement during the years that Ferdinand Marcos was president of the Philippines. During that time, both sides expressed the desire to establish a strategic and cooperative relationship that would promote peace and development. However, relations between the two countries have suffered as a result of disputes over the sovereignty of some islands and shoals in the Spratly Islands. On 8 April 2012, BRP Gregorio del Pilar (PF-15), a frigate of the Philippine Navy, was immediately sent to the Scarborough shoal after spotting eight Chinese fishing vessels. Due to the Scarborough Shoal standoff, relations between the two countries soured. The US government’s attitude was supportive of the Philippines, an ally, and the American strategic footprint in Philippine territory gave the Aquino Administration a degree of confidence in standing up to China in the South China Sea imbroglio. In June 2012, President Aquino admitted that Philippine–China relations had not normalized. One month later, President Aquino said that his administration would not back down

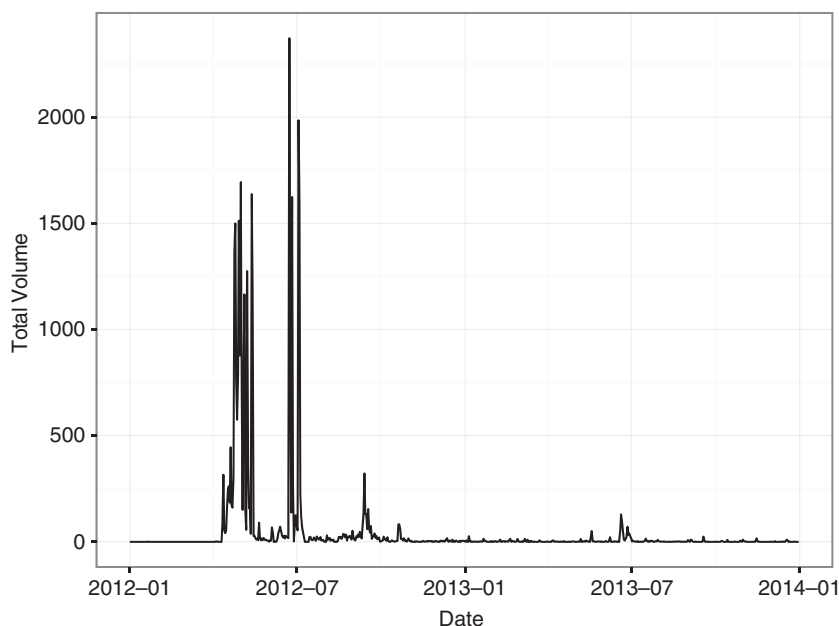


Figure 1 Volume trend from 2012 to 2013 for posts that mention US and Scarborough Shoal.

from its territorial row with China and that the Philippine military would fight for the country's territorial defense requirements.

Chinese responses to these incidents were present on Weibo. As can be seen from Fig. 1, Weibo posts about the Philippines and the island disputes experienced two huge peaks in 2012 – one starting in early April when the Scarborough Shoal standoff took place, and another starting in late July, when Aquino made his strongly-worded speech.

A total of 34,034 posts was gathered for this analysis. The keywords we used were “美国” (United States) and “黄岩岛” (Huangyan Island/ Scarborough Shoal). In this way, we made sure that the posts we collected were about the United States and the island disputes. Similar to what we did before, we classified these posts in several categories: ‘positive political’, ‘neutral political’, ‘negative political’, ‘critical of the Chinese government’, and ‘the Philippines hiding behind the United States’. We discarded the three social categories because Chinese attitudes towards the Philippines and American society do not seem to be implicated in the territorial dispute.

Moreover, in the process of our reading, we came across two huge categories of posts that did not belong to any of the categories we defined in the general analysis. First, instead of expressing their concerns and hatred of the Philippines or the United States, many Weibo users expressed their disappointment with the Chinese government. They hoped that the Chinese government would make a tougher stand for Chinese national interests. Second, we noticed that there was a large amount of traffic claiming that the Philippines was hiding behind its ally, the United States. A common theme in these posts was admiration of US power.

The results are summarized in Table 4. Not surprisingly, the Chinese hold very negative views of the United States when they focus on this conflict. Many of the posts (42%) were critical about US overseas hegemony and its abuse of power in the region. 13% of the posts were neutral about US policies in the region and another 6% of the posts expressed admiration for US power, viewing the US presence in the region as a reflection of its determination. Interestingly, 33% of the posts in this analysis criticize the Chinese government for being too weak in its response to the dispute and thus incapable of protecting its interests.

As we worked on this article, another big event that concerned China and the Philippines took place. On 12 July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled on a case brought by the Philippines about its longtime territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea. The ruling turned out to be a sweeping victory for the Philippines as it declared that China's claim to historic rights within the 'nine-dash line' was not valid according to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.⁶ This embarrassing verdict soon sparked heated discussion on Chinese media, including Weibo. Similar to what we did with the territorial disputes between China and the Philippines, we did a simplified

6 The ruling establishes that the Spratley Islands/Scarborough Shoals are not inhabited. This decision means that these islands do not generate an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). At most, they would generate a 12-mile territorial sea if one state successfully established sovereignty over them. So the decision automatically implies that the relevant part of the South China Sea (more than 12 miles from any island) could not be part of China's EEZ because it is too far from China. Some of the contested areas, furthermore, are clearly within the EEZ of the Philippines.

Table 4 Chinese attitudes toward the United States on the island disputes between China and the Philippines

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Political	2,081	6
Neutral Political	4,302	13
Negative Political	14,348	42
Critical of the Chinese Government	11,242	33
The Philippines Hiding behind the United States	2,061	6

analysis⁷ of the Weibo data to learn Chinese netizens’ response to this serious challenge to China’s control over the Sea.

We read 300 posts searched with the keyword ‘the South China Sea’, and put them into the categories that we found appropriate as if we were training them systematically. Not surprisingly, the majority of the posts (62%) expressed negative feelings about the ruling. Posts in this category criticized the Law of Sea ruling as being unjust and ridiculous. The second biggest category, however, was more surprising. It was not about how the Philippines or other neighboring countries challenged China’s hold over the Sea, but about reflections on Chinese nationalism. 14% of the posts reflected on their fellow citizens’ overreaction to this event. They thought that it was stupid to love their country by boycotting foreign products and cursing international law.⁸ The third biggest dealt with the US (11%). The argument was the same that we found in the Philippine analysis. People believed that the United States was behind the ruling and thus accused the US government of

7 As discussed before, by this point we no longer had access to the universe of Weibo posts through Crimson Hexagon. We instead used a simplified process to get a rough sense of the discussion. We used two sets of keywords to generate posts about this event directly in Weibo on the date when the ruling came out. We analyzed posts on the day after the verdict. We first used a single keyword ‘the South China Sea’ to see general attitudes toward the event. We then added another keyword ‘the United States’ to see how the Chinese viewed the US role in this issue.

8 For example, ‘你们一到南海问题就站出来说要去打战, 要反对美货, 反对日货。战争流氓才喜欢的。 You guys always stand out and call for wars when it comes to the South China Sea issue. You also call for boycotting US products and Japanese products. Only war rogues love wars so much.’

meddling in other countries' affairs.⁹ Finally, 5% of the posts expressed negative attitudes toward the Philippines and 2% of the posts asked the Chinese government to stay tough and not show weakness. The rest of the posts were neutral posts and news.

We then added another keyword 'the United States' in addition to 'the South China Sea' to take a closer look at how the Chinese netizens specifically viewed the role of the United States in this event. The posts searched out with these keywords looked very similar to what we saw in the Philippines analysis. The biggest traffic was negative attitudes toward the United States (73%). 13% of the posts were neutral posts and news. 7% were criticism to Chinese nationalist sentiment. 4% were about the Philippines hiding behind the United States. The rest (3%) were suggestions to the Chinese government.¹⁰

In summary, US regional interventionism was not popular. Criticisms of US interventionism represented the biggest category of posts both in our analysis of Huangyan Island/Scarborough Shoal and the Law of Sea ruling. Two kinds of criticism stood out from this discourse. First, there was a high volume of posts criticizing the United States for abusing its power in East Asia. The Chinese saw US presence in the region as a serious challenge not only to Chinese territorial security, but also to China's authority over neighboring countries. These posts frequently used phrases such as 'double standard', 'world police', and 'hegemonic power' to express concerns and anger toward US meddling in the region. The second type of criticism mainly criticized the United States for acting treacherously toward its 'so called' allies. These posts claimed that the US government had been simply manipulating the Philippines to achieve its own interests in the region. They

9 Here is one example. '美国重返亚太, 是在搬起石头砸自己的脚, 只会加快他出亚太的步伐。The Pivot to Asia strategy is a strategy of picking up a heavy stone and throwing on his own feet. It will only speed up the pace of .S getting out of the Asia Pacific region.'

10 In our reading of the posts, we also observed that the state media in China played a significant role in guiding public opinions on Weibo. The hottest two topics on Weibo about the ruling were '南海诸岛是中国的 The South China Sea islands belong to China' and '南海仲裁案 Philippines v. China.' These two topics—essentially the equivalent of using a hashtag on Twitter—were deployed by China Central Television (CCTV) and People's Daily (the official newspaper of the Communist Party) respectively. In hosting the topics, these two Weibo accounts of the state media frequently forwarded news reports, nationalistic remarks about the event, and documentaries introducing China's historic claim of the South China sea to encourage further discussions. This is an interesting evidence of how state media helps lead nationalistic discussions.

concluded that it was only a matter of time until the United States would abandon the Philippines for its own interests.

Yet instead of criticism of the Philippines, the second largest category was criticism of the Chinese government or nationalism. Because we focused on posts mentioning both the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the United States, we got an interesting window into comments that both mentioned the United States and were somehow critical of the Chinese government. Here we see Weibo discourse prodding the government to use its power to defend its sovereignty claims and expand its power projection. As China's economic and military power increased over the years, the Chinese became less tolerant about neighboring countries' actions at odds with Chinese policy. Most of these posts expressed deep disappointment in the Chinese government for being too weak to protect its national interests and its people. Moreover, some posts even criticized the government for allegedly treating its own people in a much harsher way than foreign countries. The critical views in this category of posts are directed toward the Chinese government, not toward the United States or the Philippines.

5.2 United States and the North Korean Nuclear Weapons Program

We present in this section an analysis of Chinese attitudes toward the United States in the context of the North Korean nuclear weapons program. As with the Philippines analysis, we used keywords related only to the United States and the event. In our reading of the posts, we noticed that two new themes emerged. We thus created two additional categories: 'critical of the North Korean government' and how Chinese government should respond'.

A total of 54,701 posts were gathered on this topic. This is many more than we gathered for the Philippines analysis, meaning that more people were interested in this event. As shown in Table 5, compared to Chinese attitudes toward the United States in the territorial disputes, Chinese netizens held a much more neutral view about U.S. roles in the North Korean nuclear crisis. Many tended to view the US presence in the region as neither a good nor a bad thing, but simply as another force that might contribute to peaceful negotiations. More interestingly, in addition to neutral opinions, more people thought that the United States played a

Table 5 Chinese attitudes toward the United States on the North Korean Nuclear Program

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Political	9,820	18
Neutral Political	14,334	26
Negative Political	6,329	12
Critical of the North Korean Government	13,947	25
How Chinese Government Should Respond	10,271	19

positive role rather than a negative role in this event. As North Korea is seen as a threat to the stability of the region, US involvement is actually appreciated. Many posts also talked about how the United States could serve as a stabilizing power in the region to help solve the nuclear crisis for China. Finally, similar to what we observed previously, a large number of Weibo users reflected on the Chinese government's reactions to the event and offered suggestions and advice on its future actions.

In summary, our findings suggest that while Chinese held positive attitudes toward the United States in general, when Chinese netizens perceived the United States to be threatening Chinese interests, as in the South China Sea, anti-American sentiments became strong. But this does not mean that they regard any American involvement in the region negatively. Chinese Weibo users view US engagement in issues regarding North Korea in a remarkably positive light.

Overall, our aggregate analysis shows that when Chinese people posted about the United States in general, they mainly discussed US domestic social and political character rather than its foreign policy, and their views were mostly positive. They praised the US political and legal system and its democratic and liberal values. But when the United States intervened in ways opposed to Chinese policy, attention focused on American foreign policy and became predominantly negative. Chinese netizens are quite ambivalent toward the United States, differentiating their views depending on the context.

6 Puzzles from comparative analysis and possible future directions

Jamal et al. (2015) conducted an analysis similar to ours to examine views toward the United States by Twitter participants in the Middle

East. Comparing our Weibo results with Twitter results from the Middle East generates a stark contrast, which generates an analytical puzzle. Specifically, why do the Chinese hold generally positive views of the United States although China, like many of the Middle Eastern countries, has viewed US foreign policies in the region as a serious violation to its sovereignty and an extension of US hegemony in global affairs? The positive view by Weibo users of American politics and society contrasts dramatically with the Middle Eastern findings. [Jamal et al. \(2015, Table 2\)](#) shows that 77% of either positive or negative posts about US society or politics from the Middle East analysis were negative, and with respect to the Egyptian and Syrian situations, over 95% of posts with a positive or negative view were negative. This stands in stark contrast with our Weibo data. Omitting neutral comments and aggregating social and political comments, 95% of posts on the US were positive, 56% for Japan, 54% for Russia, and 32% for Vietnam.

Why is Weibo opinion so positive toward the United States, in stark contrast to Middle Eastern views? We cannot solve that puzzle now but we make some suggestions about possible future work when the relevant data may become available. One possibility is that the answer lies in the difference between self-confident, assertive nationalism (China) and the frustrated views of publics whose nationalist aspirations are unrealized (Middle East). The United States is a notably nationalistic country. It is also successful on the criteria that China defines as its own core interests: domestic stability, economic growth, protection of territorial sovereignty, and projection of national power. So it may seem natural that Chinese citizens admire the United States: it has attained what China aspires to and what most Chinese people expect their country to attain. On this view, Chinese netizens should only be negative toward the United States when they feel that China's interests are directly threatened by US action. When the United States is simply acting as a great power, their reactions will be an ambivalent mixture of admiration and envy.

In the Middle East, American foreign policy – in its support for Israel, its military interventions, and its alignments with various authoritarian Arab regimes – has frustrated nationalistic impulses. Furthermore, there is no likelihood of any Middle Eastern country becoming a great power and thereby assuming prerogatives similar to those seized by the United States. For Middle Easterners, therefore, the

United States is less likely to be an object of admiration, and US foreign policy predominantly generates fear, envy, and animosity. Indeed when Arabic Twitterites talked positively about US politics, it was always in terms of US domestic institutions and how it treats its citizens. As we have seen, Weibo respondents also praised US domestic politics, but in addition, some Chinese netizens express admiration for the exercise of US power internationally. [Jamal et al. \(2015\)](#) found no evidence of admiration for US power internationally.

Another explanation for the puzzle is that Chinese citizens in general hold a rosier view of western countries, including the United States, than the general population of the Middle East, as a result of misinformation on the Chinese online environment about foreign countries ([Chen, 2017](#); [Han, 2015](#); [Huang, 2015](#); [Huang and Yeh, 2017](#); [Huang, 2017](#); [Lorentzen, 2014](#)). As China blocks a large portion of the global internet as well as virtual private networks, Chinese citizens have lost access to thousands of websites and social media platforms. It is possible, we speculate, that this information closure has led Chinese citizens to have an overly rosy picture of the political system and social economic conditions of the United States. The more complicated or darker side of the image may be less known to Chinese citizens, leading to an upward bias in Chinese attitudes toward the United States. Compared to China, censorship in Middle Eastern countries is less harsh. As Twitter and Facebook are still allowed in most Middle Eastern countries, citizens may have more comprehensive and sophisticated knowledge of the United States, including both its strengths and weaknesses in operating its political system and social lives.

As discussed, we only had access to Weibo data to conduct analyses for a limited period of time and only analyzed the data covering a two-year time period. Although we do not now have access to the data/platform to revisit the analyses above or conduct new ones, we briefly sketch out interesting paths were this to change in the future.

One obvious descriptive inquiry would test whether the patterns we observe have changed over time. More analytically, however, we would seek to explain the puzzle just identified: why Chinese netizens are so positive toward US domestic institutions and why there are even occasional expressions of grudging admiration for the exercise of US power in world politics. Our speculation above suggests that Chinese netizens

may admire US power partly because they expect China soon to occupy a similar position.

A variant on this possibility is that for Chinese citizens to take a positive view of the United States, and US foreign policy, may constitute a way safely to criticize China's government. Praising US domestic institutions implies criticism of China's institutions and praising US foreign policy could imply criticism of the perceived weakness and passivity of Chinese policy. This is especially true given the increasingly restrictive media environment we observe in Xi's China. Under strict internet regulations, there is growing pressure of self-censorship as well as the more systematic and skillful censorship performed by the Communist Party of China (CCP), making criticism of China's leadership and policies both risky and futile. In this situation, praising US domestic institutions can be an effective outlet for complaints and grievance. A research design that contrasts posts that discuss the United States without mentioning China with posts that discuss both the United States and China, could generate relevant evidence. If a positive view of the United States is a way to criticize China's government, then posts that mention both countries in the latter category will be much more favorable to the United States than posts that only discuss the United States.

We would further expect that how China and the United States are juxtaposed will differ between domestic and foreign policy posts. The domestic posts will contrast China with the United States (so praise for the US implies criticism of China). In the foreign policy posts, their current policies will be contrasted (China good, United States bad) but there will be an identifiable minority of posts that say, in effect, 'of course the US behaves this way; any great power would.'

In explaining the contrast between Middle Eastern views of the United States and the much more positive Chinese views, we suggested that China's great power status and successful rise could provide a key to the answer. The United States is both nationalistic and successful, according to criteria accepted by China: domestic stability, economic growth, and the projection of power abroad. It may, therefore, seem natural that Chinese citizens admire the United States: it has attained what China aspires to. American foreign policy in the Middle East, by contrast, has frustrated nationalistic impulses, without offering a model to emulate. For Middle Easterners the United States is much less likely

to be an object of admiration and US foreign policy does not generate grudging respect for the country even while it generates almost universal opposition to the policy.

We expect many Chinese to see China as likely to be in America's place as a major world power in the foreseeable future, and therefore to identify to some extent with the United States, not simply against it as a victim of US intervention. We expect no Middle Eastern posts that adopt this position.

7 Conclusion

Chinese views toward the United States are important in world politics and the subject of an extensive literature. While previous quantitative work relies extensively on public opinion polls and surveys, we focus on social media, a new platform that facilitates fast communication and interaction between anonymous individuals online. Using the ForSight platform of Crimson Hexagon, we adapted their technology to monitor millions of posts on Weibo from 1 January 2012 through 31 December 2013.

Our findings from the aggregate analyses are striking. Rather than anti-American sentiment, we found that more than half of the Weibo posts expressed admiration for the US political system and institutional design, although less than 4% of the posts concerned US society. According to these results, Chinese held positive views about US politics in general but were much less interested in US social issues. These results are very different from what surveys reveal. Instead of rising anti-Americanism, we see considerable amity toward the United States. This amity mainly comes from view of US domestic politics rather than social norms, but emphatically does not extend to US foreign policy.

Our analysis of Chinese attitudes toward its three neighboring countries – Russia, Japan, and Vietnam – also reveals interesting results. Although Chinese spoke highly of Russian politics, no one expressed positive attitudes toward Japanese politics. There was also variation in what aspects of the foreign country attracted the most attention: negative social traffic was the biggest category in the Russian analysis, while nearly half of the posts in the Japan analysis expressed positive views about Japanese society. On Vietnam, most Chinese were interested in

its society and were negative about its social issues, but the people were nearly equally positive and negative about Vietnamese politics. These findings show that Weibo users hold different views toward different countries according to their familiarity with and amity toward them.

In addition to general responses, our focus on social media allows us to examine Chinese Weibo users' responses to specific events. We show that Chinese attitudes toward the United States are very negative when it comes to actions that Chinese netizens believe threaten core Chinese interests. In the case of China's territorial disputes with the Philippines, Chinese netizens viewed US involvement negatively as a reflection of US hegemony in the region. Surprisingly, however, Chinese netizens viewed US involvement in seeking to cope with North Korea in a relatively positive light. Chinese attitudes toward the United States, as expressed on Weibo, are ambivalent and differentiated by issue.

These findings together contribute to our understanding of the ongoing debate in the existing literature on Chinese views of the United States – whether Chinese amity and enmity toward the United States comes from the differing value and ideology systems of the two countries, or from sino-US bilateral economic and social interactions in the international arena. We show that Chinese views toward the United States are not statically based on ideological differences, but rather evolve as international circumstances change following specific events. Chinese netizens show strikingly different attitudes toward the United States in response to events that are perceived to show different levels of relevance and threat to Chinese national interests. Consequently, the information Chinese netizens receive and the news stories they read about foreign countries and international events are extremely important to forming their perceptions of the world, as they would largely determine people's evaluations of the international system and China's role in it, and in turn shape their attitudes toward foreign countries. This fluid nature of Chinese views of international relations partially explain why the CCP has strong incentives to closely monitor and screen the information released to its people. While censorship might be an effective strategy to remove posts that do not support China's foreign policy making and domestic stability, public discourse could be affected at least as much by regulating and leading online discussions of foreign countries and international events. We do not claim that our

findings reflect what Chinese attitudes would be in a perfectly unbiased context. Instead, our study provides a close approximation of Chinese netizens' views of international interactions under the influence of the CCP regime.

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