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Media Influence on Ethnocentrism towards Europeans

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Executive Summary

1. Chinese media play a role in influencing people's perceptions of differences between ingroups and outgroup. And it is used by the Chinese state to "massage" people's negative sentiment towards foreign countries, particularly Japan and the United States.
2. The Chinese state generally constraints negative news stories and pulls views towards the U.S. and Japan into a positive direction so as to foster positive relations. Critical news reporting is only temporarily allowed in times of crisis to express nationalists' anger.
3. The Chinese media play a role in constraining ethnocentrism towards Europeans by transmitting positive messages that lead to perceptions of the outgroups as more positive and more similar to the ingroups.
4. Among Chinese media users, those who are more attentive towards the EU when reading the news tend to perceive less difference between themselves and Europeans.
5. Generally, Internet users tend to hold more ethnocentric views and perceive greater difference between Chinese and Europeans than users of traditional media sources. Opinions expressed on the Internet greatly differ from those of average citizens; online opinion is therefore not representative of Chinese public opinion.

Media Influence on Ethnocentrism towards Europeans

Daniela Stockmann*

General media effects on ethnocentrism towards Europeans in China

- 1.1 Nationalism seems to be on the rise in China. Foreign media frequently report about nationalist outbursts in China, such as the demonstrations and mass appeals to boycott French products shortly before the Beijing Olympics in 2008. It is widely believed that this rise of Chinese nationalism is mainly a result of propaganda initiated by the state to boost regime stability.
- 1.2 Do Chinese media promote ethnocentrism towards Europeans? Ethnocentrism is a predisposition to divide human society into ingroups and outgroups and to perceive them as different from one another. With respect to stereotypes regarding a person's own national identity (the ingroup) and a foreign identity (the outgroup), ethnocentrism has been found to be closely linked to nationalism.
- 1.3 Most research on media effects on attitudes towards foreign countries in China has been conducted about Japan and the United States. In contrast to the common wisdom as publicized in foreign news reporting about China, nationalism poses constraints and pressures on foreign-policy making by the central leadership.
- 1.4 Since the Chinese government aims to foster positive relations with the United States and Japan, under regular circumstances the Chinese state constraints negative news stories and thus pulls views towards the United States and Japan into a positive direction.
- 1.5 Only in times of crisis, such as during the Anti-Japanese protests in 2005, does this pattern of media management change. When there is tension, the state may allow media to temporarily follow market demands and publicize highly critical news stories, but tends to impose constraints on news reporting once angry nationalists have been allowed to express their anger. Data shows that the media play a similar role when constraining ethnocentrism towards Europeans.

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- 1.6 The first part of the paper explores general media effects, while the second part investigates the role of the internet as the most autonomous information source in China in relation to more tightly controlled traditional media. Results show that people who are attentive towards Europe when reading the news tend to perceive less difference between Europeans and Chinese; Internet users tend to have more ethnocentric views and should not be regarded as representative of Chinese public opinion, more generally.

Assessing media effects on ethnocentrism and the role of Internet

- 2.1 To analyze media effects on ethnocentrism towards Europeans I rely on statistical analysis of a random public opinion survey on Chinese Attitudes towards Europeans and the European Union (CVE). The CVE was conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Science and People's University of China in collaboration with local partner institutions in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Xi'an, and Nanning between June and July 2010.
- 2.2 Sampling was based on PPS random sampling based on lists of registered residence. Results are complemented with interviews conducted with 123 media practitioners by trained graduate students in local dialect, henceforth referred to as CVE media expert survey. The six cities for the CVE survey were chosen in order to cover differences across regions, levels of economic development, and integration into international markets.
- 2.3 Since current knowledge about media influence on attitudes towards foreign countries focuses on Japan and the United States, I include these countries to establish a baseline for comparison. In addition, I included Russia as a comparison case since Chinese citizens often perceive Russians as Europeans.
- 2.4 In the statistical analysis, I measure ethnocentrism by tapping into the degree to which respondents perceived Chinese as people to be different from Europeans in comparison to Americans, Japanese, and Russians.¹

¹ To capture the degree to which respondents believed Chinese and people from other countries differed in terms of their inherent characteristics, I constructed an identity difference measure. Respondents were asked where they thought Chinese and EU citizens/ Americans/ Japanese/ Russians as people were on a 1-7 peaceful-to-warlike scale and a 1-7 trustworthy-to-untrustworthy scale. The scales were combined, and the Chinese means were subtracted from the means of the foreign country, yielding an identity difference score that ran from -48 to +48. The higher the number, the greater the perceived identity difference; negative numbers indicate high ethnocentrism, while positive numbers indicate low ethnocentrism.

- 2.5 In order to assess media effects I rely on a person's level of awareness regarding the European Union. I explicitly do *not* rely on measures for media use since exposure alone does not guarantee that a person also receives a media message. For example, if someone is interested in sports, she will skip the political news section of a newspaper and not receive any news about politics.
- 2.6 To assess a person's level of awareness I rely on a person's level of knowledge about the EU, which is the most accepted measure for awareness in the field of political communication.² In the statistical analysis, control variables were chosen based on the literature on stereotypes and public opinion, including patriotism; political satisfaction; socialization, direct contact with Europeans, values, educational degree, CCP party membership, and gender.
- 2.7 Results demonstrate a strong positive relationship between awareness and less ethnocentrism towards Europeans and the United States. With respect to Japan and Russia these results are either not statistically significant or substantially smaller, which is likely to be a result of the small number of respondents that pay attention to either of these countries when reading the international news.
- 2.8 Yet with respect to Europeans and the Americans Chinese media users tend to perceive less difference between themselves and these outgroups as they become more aware/pay more attention towards the European Union or the United States when reading the news.
- 2.9 In a second step, I focused on the role of the internet as the most autonomous information source in China in promoting nationalism. Statistical analysis shows that Internet users tend to be significantly more ethnocentric and perceive greater difference between Chinese and Europeans compared to users of traditional media sources.

² The CVE included questions that asked about the headquarters of the EU, the number of member states, whether Turkey, Switzerland, Russia, Poland, and Norway constituted an EU member state, and whether France, Germany, Poland, and Russia, does not use the Euro. Correct responses to these items were summed and respondents who fell into the highest categories (getting between eight and 11 items right) grouped together to facilitate empirical analysis. Besides, in order to be able to compare to media influence on other countries I also employ a measure for a person's level of awareness, which is based on a question that asked how much attention to international news a person paid when reading newspapers, watching news on TV, or surfing the Internet. A follow-up question asked which country the respondent paid most attention to among a choice of the US, EU countries, Russia, Japan, India, and "other." Based on these questions I developed measures for a person's degree of attention towards the US, EU countries, Japan, and Russia. This measure allows for some degree of comparison to other countries.

- 2.10 Yet even among Internet users there is a considerable amount of diversity of views regarding foreign countries. There is a significant difference between those who use blogs and those who participate in chat discussion forums (BBS) in terms of their views about Europeans.
- 2.11 Netizens who use blogs tend to be more ethnocentric and people who like to chat in chat forums (BBS) tend to be less ethnocentric than those who read the news online. This is the case despite a significant overlap of about 70 percent between blog users and BBS users. Depending on their preferred channel of communication, netizens differ systematically in terms of their ethnocentric views, though as a rule of thumb, they tend to hold more ethnocentric views than users of traditional media sources.
- 2.12 The Chinese case shows that media may “massage” public sentiment towards outgroups by transmitting positive messages that lead to perceptions of the outgroup as more positive and more similar to the ingroups. In the six Chinese cities examined here, the more aware were also less likely to hold ethnocentric views.
- 2.13 Results suggest that people with views that conflict with the positive official line promoted in the traditional media are more likely to move into less tightly controlled sources of information, particularly the Internet. Therefore, opinions spread on the Internet considerably differ from average views of Chinese urban residents, even though Chinese leaders frequently use Internet opinions as examples for the public views and feelings of the Chinese people.

Interpreting the Chinese Media and Developing a Public Relations Strategy

- 3.1 This study has implications for 1) interpreting the Chinese media and 2) developing a public relations strategy towards China by the European Union and/or individual member states.

Interpreting the Chinese Media

- 3.2 During the reform era the Chinese media has undergone marketization, including deregulation, commercialization, and partial privatization. Though the state is still able to exert a large amount of control over media outlets, marketization has increased the influence of media audiences and investors in what and how Chinese journalists report international events; it would be wrong to conclude that everything published in the Chinese media represents the opinion of Chinese public officials.

Below are some suggestions on how to interpret international news content in Chinese media outlets.

- 3.3 If government officials are mentioned by name or if the news story is related to Chinese foreign policy, reporting becomes more sensitive and tends to be closer to the position of the Chinese government. If reporting is about foreign policy but unrelated to the Chinese government *or* related to society and culture, such as education, science, sports, or arts, news reporting is open and tends to reflect journalists' own opinions, audience demands, intellectuals, or other social activists that may lobby the Chinese media.
- 3.4 More strongly marketized media, such as so-called metro-papers emerging by the end of the 1990s, tend to be somewhat closer to audience demands than less strongly marketized media, such as so-called party papers. Online news content tends to be similar to the most strongly marketized traditional media outlets. The most marketized media outlets in China tend to be responsive to people living in cities located at the more developed East coast who are oriented towards the "West" (they have traveled to Europe or the United States and speak English). Despite their interest in Europe and the United States these media audiences can have strongly ethnocentric and nationalist sentiment.
- 3.5 During crisis situations, the Chinese Propaganda Department may abstain from issuing instructions. In the absence of instructions journalists usually respond to market demands for critical and nationalist news, which mobilizes anti-foreign protests. In this case, the expression of nationalist sentiment in media outlets and protests reflects true opinions of specific social groups (the audience of the marketized media), though the expression of such sentiment may be to the advantage of the Chinese state. In crisis situations, Chinese media may express opinions of both, (a sub-set of) Chinese society and the Chinese state.

Developing a Public Relations Strategy

- 3.6 Compared to Japan and the United States, ethnocentrism towards Europeans is still limited; nevertheless, policy-makers should prevent that ethnocentrism reaches the same levels as the United States or Japan, since ethnocentrism can interfere with Chinese foreign policy-making when there are tensions in international relations.

- 3.7 To prevent a decline of positive sentiment towards the European Union and individual member states or to further improve sentiment among the Chinese public, information could be disseminated formally or informally to journalists. Yet which audiences can be reached in urban areas, television, newspapers, and online news websites have a wider reach than radio and magazines; in rural areas, television and radio is more prominent than print media and the Internet.
- 3.8 As a rule of thumb, public officials can be reached by means of party papers (such as the People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the CCP at the central level, or the Beijing Daily, the mouthpiece of the CCP at the Beijing level); average citizens by means of evening papers (such as the Chonging Evening News), and those oriented towards Europe and the United States by means of metro-papers (such as Southern Metropolitan Daily or Global Times) and the Internet (at such news websites as Sina or Sohu). At times of crisis, angry citizens tend to move into the most marketized media outlets (so-called metro-papers) and the Internet. Views expressed in those media outlets are not representative, however, of Chinese public opinion as a whole.