



The University of  
**Nottingham**

China Policy Institute

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## **Briefing Series – Issue 70**

# **Chinese Citizens' Attitudes towards the European Union and Their Origins**

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**August 2011**

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The China Policy Institute, part of the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at The University of Nottingham, was set up to analyse critical policy challenges faced by China in its rapid development. Its goals are to help expand the knowledge and understanding of contemporary China in Britain, Europe and worldwide, to help build a more informed dialogue between China and the UK and Europe, and to contribute to government and business strategies.

## **Executive Summary**

1. The "Chinese Views of EU" public survey data, based on 2,410 questionnaires from six cities in China in 2010, are used to analyze the difference in Chinese citizens' attitudes toward the European Union.
2. More than eight out of ten Chinese respondents have a positive to very positive attitude towards the EU (85%). Few have a negative to very negative attitude towards the EU or take an intermediate position.
3. The perception that EU citizens are trustworthy has the strongest effect on the attitude towards the EU.
4. This perception and the other orientations that underlie the attitude towards the EU cannot be influenced by personal experiences because only a very few respondents have ever been to EU countries or are in touch with people from EU countries.
5. Television is, according to the respondents, the most important source of information about the EU, and in second and third position, newspaper and internet.
6. Chinese political leaders, who choose for the policy option of more cooperation with the EU, are supported by the public opinion.
7. This study shows not only that a great majority of the Chinese respondents have a positive attitude towards the EU but also that a great majority also think that China and the EU should cooperate more together (88%).
8. An active information policy of the EU in China will likely remain necessary in the future, with clear goals that are measurable, prioritized actions that are most effective, and a budget that is consistent with the scale of action and that allows the policy continue to be conducted by experts.
9. Longitudinal empirical research is necessary to find out whether the policy is successful and contributes to further promoting and deepening partnership between the EU and China.

# **Chinese citizens' attitudes towards the European Union and their origins\***

Henk Dekker and Jolanda van der Noll\*

## **Key question and methodology**

- 1.1 How to explain the difference in attitudes towards the European Union among Chinese citizens? An "attitude" is a person's general feeling of favourableness or un-favourableness. Attitudes are important to study because of their effects on behavior, behavioral intentions and desires, and policy preferences.
- 1.2 International cooperation assumes the presence of positive attitudes or at least the absence of negative attitudes towards the involved countries among elites and citizens. Generally it is expected that the more positive the attitudes are, the more is the willingness to cooperate politically, both bilaterally and within the context of international organizations.
- 1.3 In the "Chinese Views of the EU" survey among 3,019 urban residents across six cities in China, the attitude towards the EU was measured by means of two questions. The first question was: "Please tell me if you have a very unfavorable, somewhat unfavorable, somewhat favorable or a very favorable impression of the EU?". The second question was: "Please tell me if you have a very unfavorable, somewhat unfavorable, somewhat favorable or a very favorable impression/image of EU citizens?".
- 1.4 The first question has also been asked about the United States, Japan and Russia and the second question also about Americans, Japanese, Russians, British, Germans, and French. Our analysis use the questionnaires of those 2,410 respondents who answered both questions regarding the attitude towards the EU.

## **Attitudes towards the EU**

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\* This is also part of the EU FP7 project "Chinese Views of the EU" policy paper series.

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- 2.1 More than eight out of ten Chinese respondents have a positive to very positive attitude towards the EU (85%). Few have a negative to very negative attitude towards the EU or take an intermediate position (6% and 9%, respectively). The attitude towards the EU is more positive than the attitudes towards Russia, the US and and Japan (74%, 58% and 32%, respectively).
- 2.2 To find out how to explain the attitude towards the EU an explanatory model has been developed based on the theories that have been successful in explaining attitudes towards out-groups in general.
- 2.3 Three processes of political attitude development has been theoretically distinguished: processing one's own experiences in direct contact, processing second-hand information from media and relevant others (socialization), and one's own thinking which implies a process of inference, in which the attitude is derived from other previously acquired cognitive and affective orientations.
- 2.4 The first two processes are represented by the direct contact theory and the socialization theory. The third process is represented by theories which focus on cognitive explanations such as the conflict of interests theory and theories which focus on affective explanations such as social identity theory. These theories provide the basis for selecting possible explanations for the difference in the attitudes towards the EU.

### **Explanation of the attitudes**

#### **➤ Possible explanation: direct contact with the EU**

- 3.1 Very few respondents have been to EU countries (98 out of 2,410) and/or are in touch with people from EU countries (521 out of 2,410). The experiences, while being in EU countries, are mainly positive. The contacts with people from EU countries in China are also mainly positive.
- 3.2 Because only a few respondents have ever been to EU countries or are in touch with people from EU countries, the attitude towards the EU of most respondents cannot be influenced by personal experiences with the EU. Their cognitions and affects that underlie the attitude towards the EU must be mainly based on informative and affective messages from other sources.

➤ **Possible explanation: socialization regarding the EU in China**

3.3 The respondents themselves say that television is their most important source of information about EU countries. In second and third position are, with a big difference, newspaper and internet. Much fewer respondents say that radio, and family and relatives are their most important sources of information. All other socializers, including teachers and school, books, friends, work and colleagues, and party, are rarely named.

3.4 That “party” has rarely been named as a socialization agency in this field may have to do with the fact that only a quarter of the respondents say they are a CCP member and only between one and two respondents say they are member of the Communist Youth League. The information respondents received from television, newspaper and internet is in their perception more positive than negative.

➤ **Possible explanation: knowledge and perceptions of the EU**

3.5 Knowledge of the EU. Almost all respondents have heard about the EU (95%). A large majority felt they know nothing or little about the EU (= subjective knowledge: 73%). Less than five out of ten correctly answered six or more factual knowledge questions (= objective knowledge: 43%).

3.6 Perception of the situation in the EU. A majority perceives that the situation in the EU is better than in China in the domains of economic prospects, employment, environment, social welfare, and quality of life. The perception about family relations is mixed.

3.7 Perceptions of EU citizens. Half of the respondents think that EU citizens in general are trustworthy, while almost two out of ten think they cannot be trusted and more than three out of ten take a middle position or answer do not know or gave no answer. Almost half of the respondents also think that EU citizens in general are peaceful, while almost two out of ten think they are aggressive and three out of ten take a middle position or answer do not know or give no answer.

- 3.8 Perceptions of the role in the world of the EU. A majority of the respondents perceive that the EU tends to play a positive role in the world regarding all six domains presented in the questionnaire. Most positive is the perception of the EU role in scientific progress, followed by its role in environment protection, international economy, peace, fighting international terrorism, and fighting poverty in the world.
- 3.9 Perceptions of conflict of interests between China and the EU. Only about one out of ten respondents perceive a conflict of interest between China and the EU, agreeing with the statement that China and the EU have such different interests that cooperating on international problems is impossible. Four out of ten respondents think that China and the EU have enough common interests to cooperate on international problems, while almost four out of ten think that China and the EU don't have many common interests, but can still work together.
- 3.10 Perceptions of conflict of values between China and the EU. More than half of the respondents perceive a conflict of values between China and the EU, agreeing with the statement that China and the EU are fairly or very distant from each other in terms of values. Between three and four out of ten perceive that China and the EU are very close or close to each other in terms of values.
- 3.11 Perception of China-EU relationship. Four out of ten think the China-EU relationship is very, quite or somewhat good. Only very few respondents think that the relationship is very, quite or somewhat bad. One third takes a neutral position. Between one and two out of ten respondents perceive the China-EU relationship unfriendly.
- 3.12 Perceptions of threat for China by the EU. Very few respondents think the EU does not at all take into account the interests of China. Almost no respondent use the word "enemy" or "rival" to describe the prospects of the relations between EU and China. Overall, only very few respondents have given threat like responses to these two questions.

**Other explanations: attitude towards Europe, China,  
people in general and one-self**

- 4.1 Attitude towards Europe. A small majority of the respondents like "European ideas of democracy". Just a minority like "European ways of doing business".
- 4.2 Attitude towards one's own country: patriotism. Almost all respondents are proud of being Chinese, positive of what China represents, and have a good feeling of what the Chinese people have done.
- 4.3 Satisfaction with one's own country. A small majority of the respondents is very or fairly satisfied with two of the five aspects of Chinese society presented in the questionnaire: economy and public safety. Majorities are not so satisfied or not satisfied at all with the environment, social welfare and employment situation.
- 4.4 Trust in general. Eight out of ten respondents agree with the statement that most people are trustworthy. Less respondents but still almost six out of ten agree with the statement that China can trust other nations.
- 4.5 Self-esteem. More than eight out of ten respondents have a positive self-esteem, agreeing with the statement "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself ". Only very few respondents, between one and two out of ten, suffer from a low positive self-esteem, disagreeing with the statement.
- 4.6 **Most important explanations:** The perception that EU citizens are trustworthy is the main predictor of the attitude towards the European Union. Next come perception that the China-EU relationship is positive, perception that EU citizens are peaceful, years of education, objective knowledge about the EU, attitude towards European ways of doing business, perception of the role in the world of the EU, and perception of the situation in the EU.
- 4.7 Weak predictors are evaluation of the contact with EU countries and citizens, subjective knowledge about the EU, perception of the situation in the EU, attitude towards European ways of doing business, and satisfaction with own country. Very weak effects have self-esteem, trust in general, attitude towards European democracy ideas, perception of mass media contents about the EU, perception of shared values, gender, perception of common interests, age, and patriotism. In total, these variables explain 17 percent of the variance in attitude towards the EU.

## **Implications for China**

5.1 The foreign policy options available to political leaders are more or less constrained by the "public opinion". This study shows that a great majority of Chinese have a positive attitude towards the EU (85%). A great majority also think that China and the EU should cooperate more together (88%). For Chinese political leaders there seems to be no need to feel constrained by the public opinion to choose for the policy option of more cooperation with the EU.

## **Implications for the EU**

6.1 "A more active information policy in China is essential to create a stronger profile for the EU", wrote the Commission of the European Communities in 1995. In 1998, the Commission wrote that the EU should "upgrade its information policy towards China substantially" In 2001 and 2003, the Commission confirmed the need of "a proactive information policy".

6.2 The goals of the EU's information - public diplomacy - policy towards China, laid down in the various policy documents are: "raising the EU's profile in China"; "increased EU visibility in China" both to the general public and to its leadership, that "will give the EU added weight in its dealings with China"; "a better understanding of each partner by the other" and "mutual understanding"; "improve awareness in China of the EU" and of "EU co-operation with China"; "improve knowledge"; and "a better picture of the EU in China over the long term".

6.3 A great variety of information policy activities are conducted to achieve these goals. The long list includes the provision of systematic and up-to-date information about the EU via Internet and audio-visual media; dissemination of publications and up-to-date information materials, targeted to the key decisionmakers, opinion formers, media, and also to schools, colleges and universities; organisation of public events; including publicity activities in EU-China co-operation programs; contributing to cultural events; systematically issuing press releases and/or holding press conferences on the occasion of major meetings such as Summits, Joint Committees and dialogues; issuing joint statements, especially after EU-China Summits; organizing collective and individual visits to Brussels of key Chinese decisionmakers,

opinionmakers, editors, journalists and reporters (the EU Visitors Programme); organisation of round tables around visits by EU personalities gathering Chinese journalists with these EU personalities; participation in business and academic fairs and exhibitions; launching European Studies programmes and study centers; promoting people-to-people contacts through increased tourist, educational and cultural exchanges, and developing initiatives in the framework of EU programmes such as Erasmus World, the China-specific strand of the Erasmus Mundus programme, and the Marie Curie fellowships. The Commission would like to do more but wrote in 2001 and 2003 that "the resources available for EU profile raising activities remain limited".

- 6.4 The goals of the EU's information policy towards China are not very specific. As a result, it is difficult to prove what goals are and what goals are not achieved. Some findings from our study appear consistent with these goals. Other findings indicate that important targets do not seem to have been reached.
- 6.5 An active information policy of the EU in China will likely remain necessary in the future, with clear goals that are measurable (see the variables in our study and their conceptualisations and measures), prioritized actions that are most effective, and a budget that is consistent with the scale of action and that allows the policy can continue to be conducted by experts.
- 6.6 Longitudinal empirical research is necessary to find out whether the information policy is successful and contributes to further promoting and deepening partnership between the EU and China.