

Destined for conflict?

Taiwanese and Chinese Public opinions on Cross-Strait relations

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The survey data are the result of the project "Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges", CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

Title page image: Word cloud showing how the Taiwanese people describe with one word Cross-Strait relations (see also Figure 1).

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1 Introduction

This report presents some of the most noteworthy findings regarding Cross-Strait relations from a public opinion survey conducted online in Taiwan and China.¹

In Taiwan,² the survey was conducted between April and June 2022 with a research sample of 1,350 respondents representative of the general population based on the quotas of gender, age (18-65 years), and region within the country.³ In Mainland China,⁴ the data was collected in March 2022 based on a survey of 3,039 respondents.⁵ Likewise, the sample was representative of the Chinese population respective to gender, age, and residence in the Chinese regions.

These surveys are part of a broader research project, 'Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges,' funded by the European Regional Development Fund and run by Palacky University Olomouc in collaboration with the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS). The survey in Taiwan was part of a wider survey of 15 Indo-Pacific countries. More outcomes from this research project will follow in the future.

Results presented here suggest high levels of Taiwanese pessimism concerning the future of Cross-Strait relations, which were already visible before the increased tensions following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022. Generally, respondents described Cross-Strait relations as tense, and many believed that a Chinese military invasion within the next ten years was possible. Compared to other countries, which usually consider China from an economic perspective, Taiwanese people's perception of China is highly political and securitized – and with good reason. A large percentage of Taiwanese people claimed their opinion on China worsened over the last three years. China's threats to invade Taiwan, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese government, and Covid-19 are some of the most pronounced reasons behind the worsening of Taiwanese people's perceptions of China.

While we did not ask respondents in China directly about their attitudes towards Cross-Strait relations due to the sensitivity of the topic, we were able to ask several related questions. The survey results suggest that Chinese people generally view Taiwan and the Taiwanese people positively

but are split on how to approach Taiwan – whether to adopt tough or friendly policies. The findings offer a notable contrast between the Chinese public's preferences and the PRC party-state's hardline declaratory policy towards Taiwan. However, outside of Cross-Strait relations, popular foreign policy preferences largely echo the official rhetoric.

2 Taiwanese views on Cross-Strait relations and Taiwan's future

Although China's military drills following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022 did not directly terrorize the Taiwanese, the survey results (collected prior to Pelosi's visit) reveal that Taiwanese society does feel the tension in the Taiwan Strait.

When asked about Cross-Strait relations, many Taiwanese respondents described them as tense. Others used adjectives such as "terrible," "dangerous," "complicated," "incompatible," "hostile," or "volatile," and even expressed the possibility of a war breaking out at any moment. Respondents used metaphors from nature and different human-to-human relationships: for some, the relationship is turbulent as waves, with "dark tides lurking underneath the surface." In a similar vein, some describe the relationship as dangerous as "walking on ice" or seemingly unreconcilable as "ice" or at a "frozen point." The two sides of the Taiwan strait were sometimes characterized in relatively equal terms such as "a married couple in disharmony," "brothers that don't get along," or "bad neighbors." However, this relationship was also compared to imbalanced power dynamics such as "mother-in-law and daughter-in-law" (connoting hierarchy) or "abusive lover." Many also used the word peace in various contexts: peaceful coexistence, peace, temporary peace, wish for peace, not peaceful, peaceful on the surface – all pointing toward the fact that currently, Taiwan and China are not using arms against each other, but that this could change in the future. Some described the relationship between Taiwan and China as a love-hate relationship and focused on the shared history or origin of the people (same origin, brothers, brothers fighting each other, family).

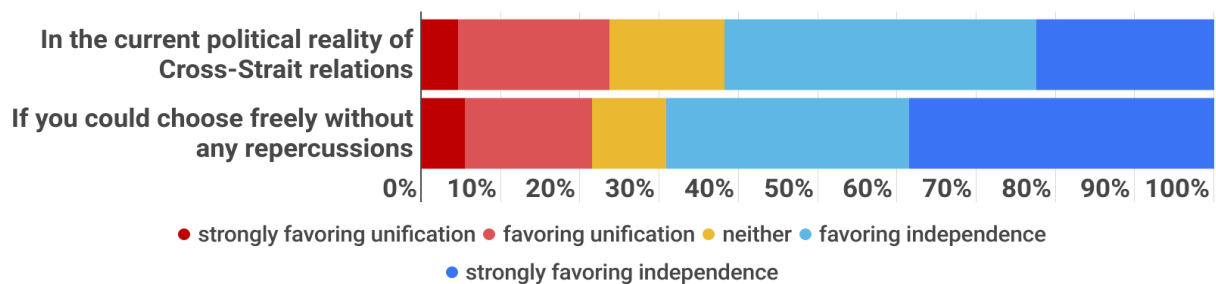
As in real life, our word cloud (see Figure 1) displays a wide range of political opinions. Responses spanned from very strong pro-independence statements ("independent of each other," "one country on each side," "two countries," "each claims its own") to strong pro-unification ones ("two sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one family," "one country two systems," "destined to unify," "fellow countrymen").

[illegible]

To give the subject of independence vs. unification more nuance, our survey presented the question in two ways: 1) in the current political reality of Cross-Strait relations and 2) without any repercussions. As shown in the figure below, two differences are noteworthy in the responses. First, strong support for independence substantially increased if participants could

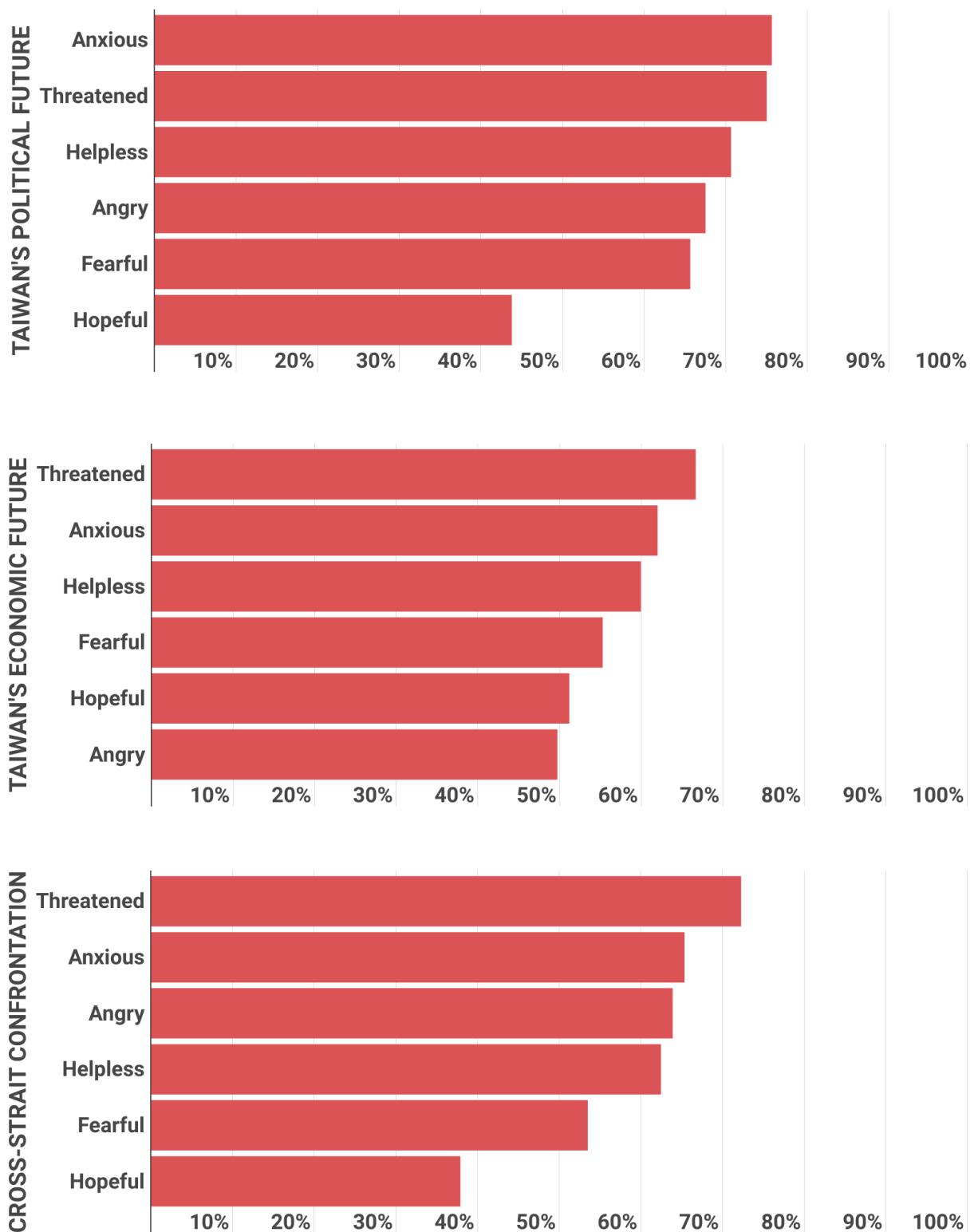
freely choose without any repercussions. Second, responses for the middle option (neither leaning towards independence nor unification) substantially decreased with free choice without repercussions. This might indicate that people would be less indecisive if they perceived more certainty in the outcome when it comes to the issue of Taiwan's independence or unification with the Mainland. It also suggests that the PRC's military threats against Taiwan have a considerable deterrent effect.

Figure 2: Are you in favor of unification with China or Taiwanese independence?



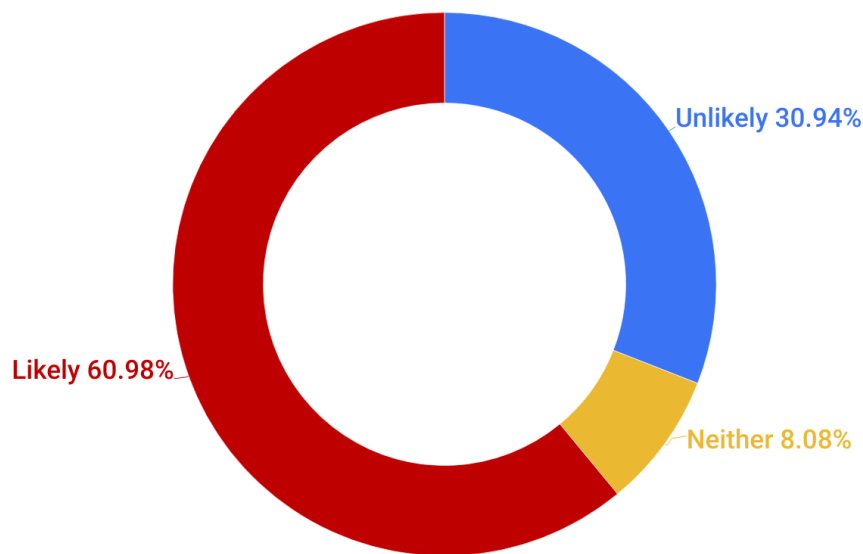
With recent developments across the Strait, we have witnessed a variety of emotions at play pertaining to Taiwan's future. As we can see from the figures below, negative emotions trumped positive emotions across the board. In particular, "anxious," "threatened," and "helpless" ranked as the top three emotions when thinking of Taiwan's economic or political outlook (see Figure 3). When thinking of Cross-Strait confrontation, it enticed an additional emotion of "anger." How those strong emotions might lead to conflicts remains a topic of great concern.

Figure 3: Thinking of Taiwan's political future / Taiwan's economic future / Cross-Strait confrontation makes me feel... (% that agree).



With recent discussions about China's potential invasion of Taiwan in the foreseeable future, how likely do the Taiwanese view such a probability? As shown in Figure 4, well over half of those polled – close to 61% – envision such a possibility in the next decade. The survey was administered before the Pelosi visit and before Xi Jinping's inauguration for the third term. The result has since been confirmed by polls conducted in August 2022, shortly after Pelosi's visit, which found 64% of Taiwanese respondents believed China would launch an armed attack "soon" or "sometime."⁶ The latter result represented an increase of 13 percentage points compared with 2021, suggesting that Taiwanese pessimism concerning the future of Cross-Strait relations is not the result of the PRC's response to Pelosi's visit. More likely, it relates to Beijing's general bellicose rhetoric amidst increased military activity, such as air force flights into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone.

Figure 4: In your opinion, how likely is a Chinese invasion of Taiwan in the next ten years?



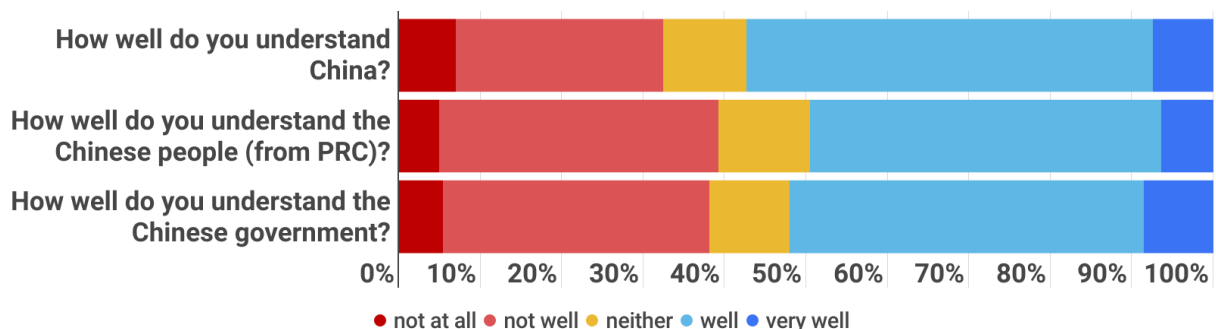
3 Taiwanese perceptions of China

Perceptions and attitudes can be influenced by how well we think we understand the other party. To that end, participants were asked to self-report their knowledge of China to gauge how well the Taiwanese believe they understand the other side. Specifically, they were asked to rate their understanding at three levels: the Chinese people, the Chinese government, and the country.

Overall, as we can see in Figure 5, understanding towards the country as a whole is believed to be the highest, while understanding towards the people seems more ambivalent. This is perhaps surprising as Cross-Strait exchange at the societal level (e.g., tourism) has taken place (albeit inconsistently) since the 1990s – and millions of Taiwanese still have family links in China.

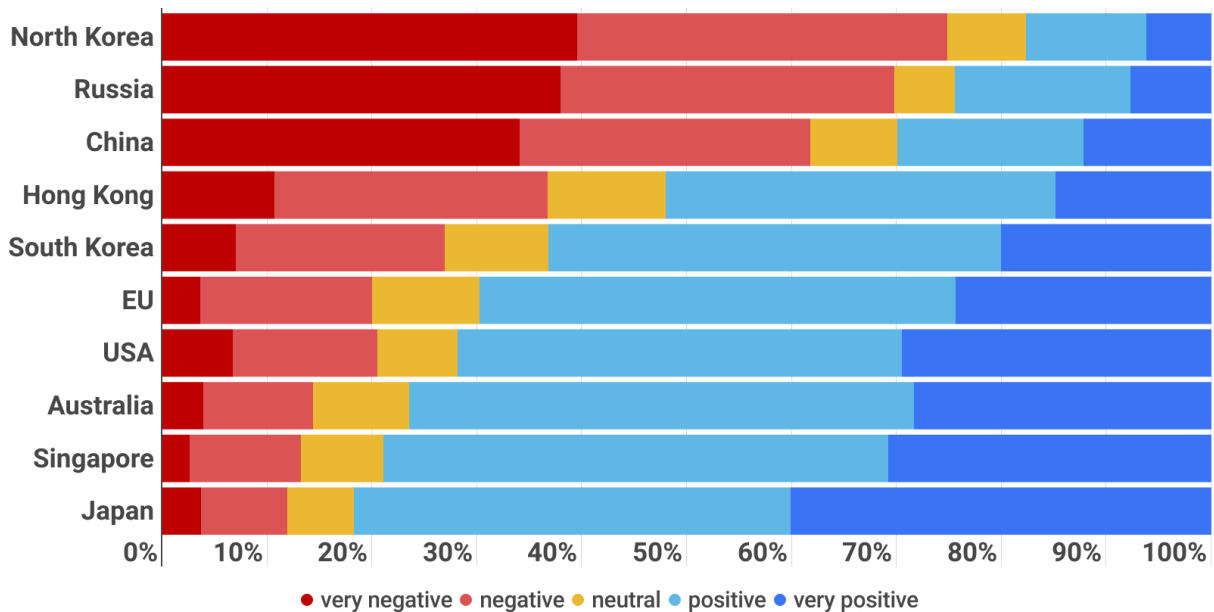
This might suggest a need for further contact and interaction between the people on both sides of the Strait. However, it could also be argued that people-to-people contact is not generating a sense of understanding.

Figure 5: Understanding of China



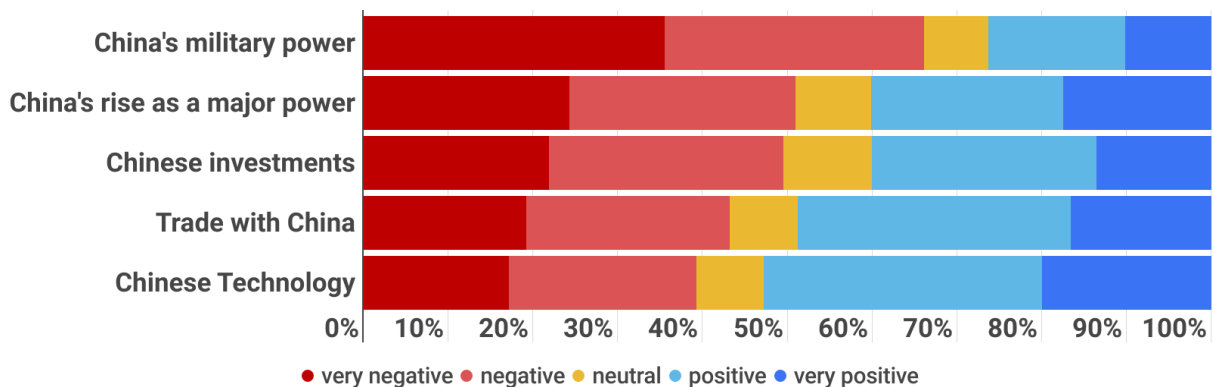
On the whole, Mainland China is among the least favorably perceived countries among the respondents from Taiwan. Within a group of 10 countries and entities respondents were asked about, China is the third most negatively perceived (62% very negative or negative), after Russia (70%), and North Korea (75%). On the opposite side, Japan (82%), Singapore (79%), and Australia (76%) are perceived most positively. EU and USA also score favorably, with approx. 70% of respondents indicating positive or very positive views (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following countries and entities? (Taiwanese respondents)



Views were divided regarding Chinese investment and trade, despite the widespread expert recognition that the PRC can use certain investment and trade dependencies to pressure Taiwan. Dominant threat perceptions easily explain the widespread Taiwanese skepticism toward China’s military power and geostrategic rise. Yet, despite the overall negative perceptions of China, almost half of the respondents indicated that they view Chinese technology positively (see Figure 7). This could be a sign that many Taiwanese have noticed an improvement in the quality of Chinese high-tech products – and that this perception overrides the centrality of technology in the geostrategic competition.

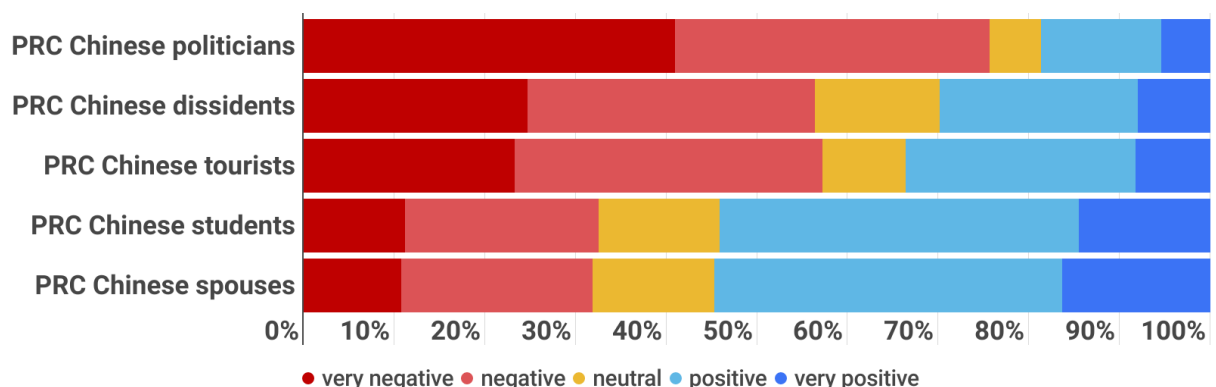
Figure 7: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following issues?



Negative Taiwanese views of Chinese politics appear to go beyond the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Around 4 out of 5 respondents (80%) said they viewed Mainland Chinese politicians negatively. However, Beijing's dissident critics fared only slightly better, with 60 percent of respondents holding negative views of the group (see Figure 8). Taiwanese respondents who were either strongly pro-unification or pro-independence had the most negative views of Chinese dissidents, suggesting the lack of interest in involvement with Mainland affairs on the part of Taiwanese nationalists. Still, the result is somewhat surprising, given the prominence of Taiwan's democratic identity in recent years. The result also likely reflects the damaging effects of years of infighting among dissident groups, which has hindered the democracy movement's effectiveness.⁷

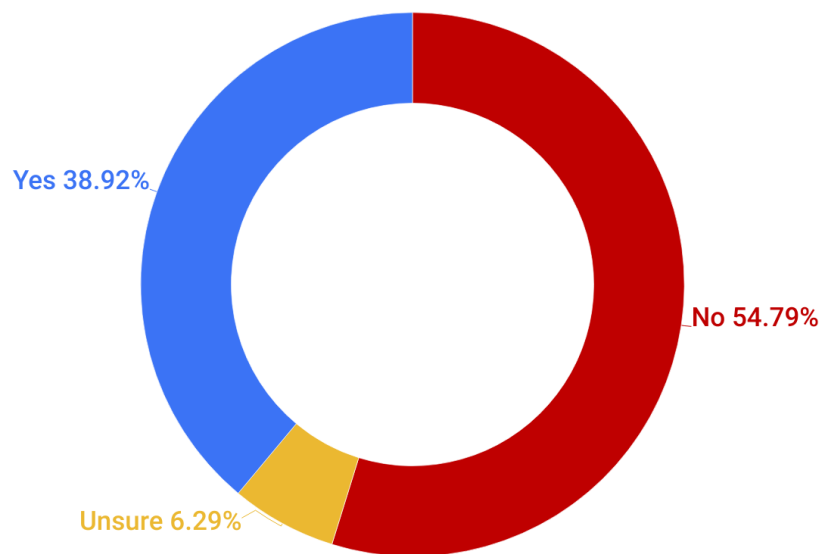
In contrast, most Taiwanese respondents claimed to have positive views of Mainland Chinese students and spouses. This suggests that Taiwanese views of Mainland Chinese people may be context-dependent, and positive views can prevail once divorced from political identity.

Figure 8: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following groups of people?



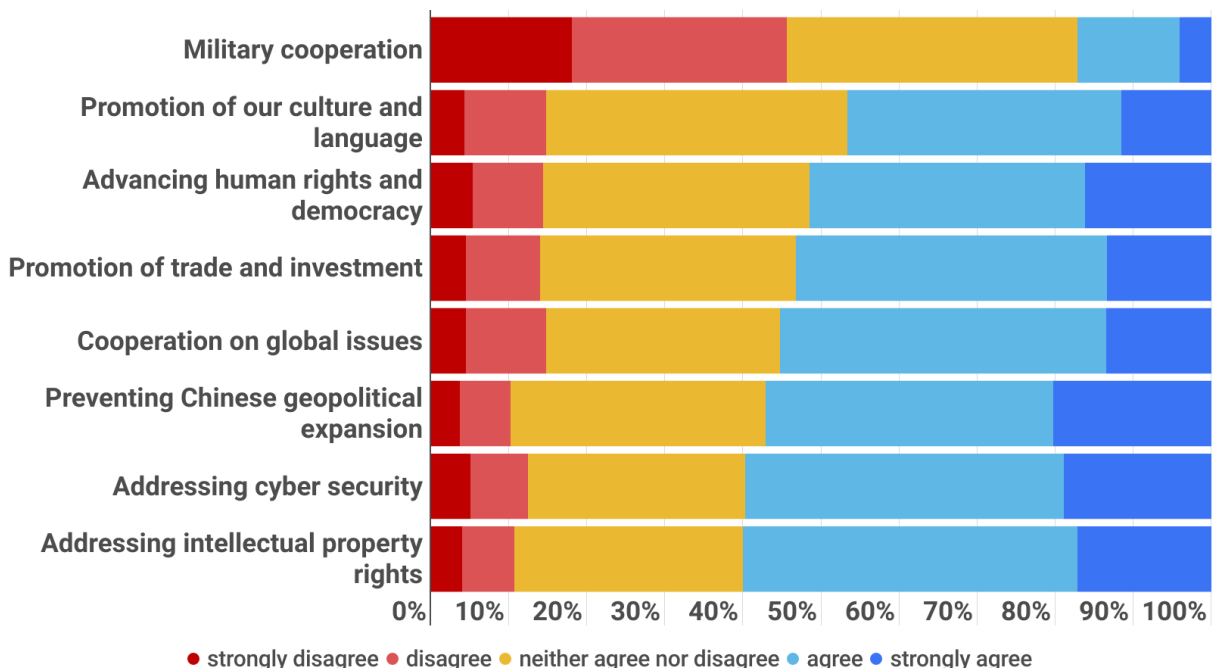
Political scientists have long debated whether China will become democratic one day. What do the people in Taiwan believe? As seen in the chart below (see Figure 9), over half of the participants (close to 55%) did not believe that China would ever be democratic. While close to 40% of the participants held a contrary view, this again points to the rather pessimistic perception of Cross-Strait relations.

Figure 9: Do you believe that China will become democratic one day?



When asked what issues that should be a priority in Taiwan's relations with China, most Taiwanese respondents agreed that addressing intellectual property rights is important, followed closely by addressing cyber security. Preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion was the third most commonly selected issue, with 57% of respondents agreeing it should be a priority. Military cooperation with China was by far the least favored option, with 46% of respondents disagreeing with making it a priority and only 17% agreeing (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: According to your opinion, Taiwan's priorities in its relations with China should be...



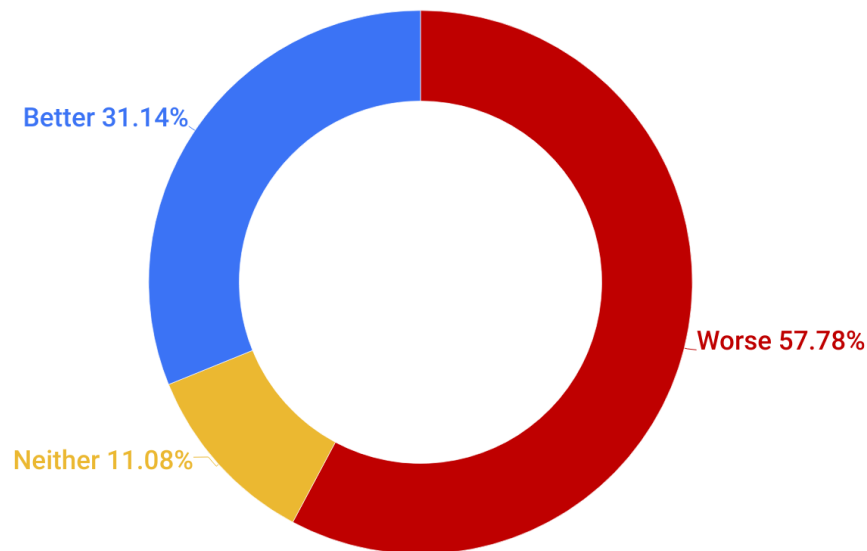
What first comes to mind when respondents think of China? Whereas respondents in other countries tended to refer to the vastness of China and the large population, Taiwanese people's top association with China is communism, followed by the Chinese Communist Party (see Figure 11). The Chinese Communist Party leader was also repeatedly mentioned, even under the ridiculing nickname Winnie-the-Pooh. However, compared to other countries, which often understand China in economic terms, Taiwanese people's first perception of China is much more political. This, in turn, relates to "the essence of CCP's regime," as often discussed by Taiwanese politicians, denoting communism, totalitarianism, dictatorship, and a lack of freedoms.

Figure 11: Taiwanese responses to "What first comes to mind when you think of China?"



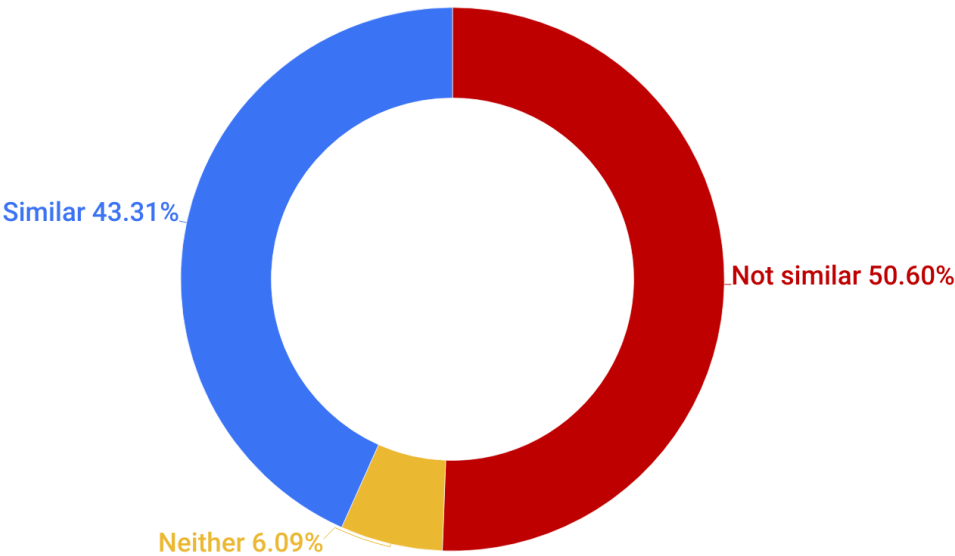
Most Taiwanese people's perception of China has worsened over the last three years (see Figure 12). The top three reasons are China's attitude towards Taiwan, the authoritarian nature of the government, and Covid-19. China is perceived as a threat to Taiwan, an aggressive bully who does not recognize Taiwan as a country. The Chinese government is seen as oppressive to its people, with Hong Kong mentioned several times; the power is concentrated, and there is no freedom under the CCP. The Covid-19 epidemic was considered poorly controlled, with several lockdowns imposed on cities like Shanghai. For those who have changed their attitude on China for the better, fast and continued progress is a big contributing factor – respondents often mentioned the current economic situation, prospective economic growth, and technological advancement.

Figure 12: Has your view of China gotten better or worse during the last three years?



Regarding cultural values, most Taiwanese respondents believe Taiwan and China are not similar (see Figure 13), despite the common majority ethnicity, language, and cultural practices. Taiwanese respondents' wariness towards China's political system and its authoritarian regime could be driving alienated cultural identities. However, further investigations are needed to explain the exact factors that caused the disparity.

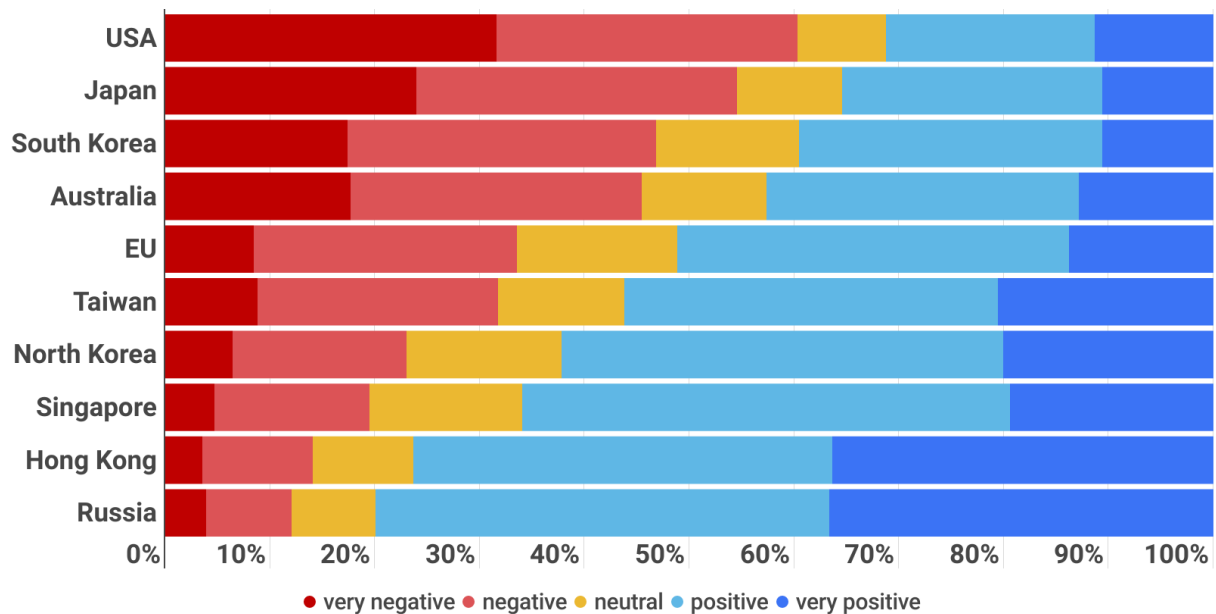
Figure 13: **How similar are Taiwan and China in regard to cultural values?**



4 Chinese people's perceptions of Taiwan and the Taiwanese people

We also conducted a survey in Mainland China, although we had to make adjustments due to political sensitivity.⁸ The survey results suggest that the Mainland Chinese, in general, view Taiwan more positively than negatively (see Figure 14). Countries with the worst images among Chinese respondents were USA and Japan, with which China has geopolitical rivalries. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Russia, which the Chinese respondents said they viewed very positively, more so than Taiwan. Singapore and Hong Kong are also viewed more positively than Taiwan.

Figure 14: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following countries and entities? (PRC respondents)



Taiwanese people are also viewed more positively (62%) than Europeans, Americans, or Indians, but less than overseas Chinese or Hongkongers (see Figure15).

Half of the Chinese respondents said they felt a strong or very strong affinity with Taiwanese people. The strongest sense of brotherhood is felt with their fellow Chinese citizens and the least with foreign citizens of Chinese origin (see Figure 16).⁹

Figure 15: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following groups of people?

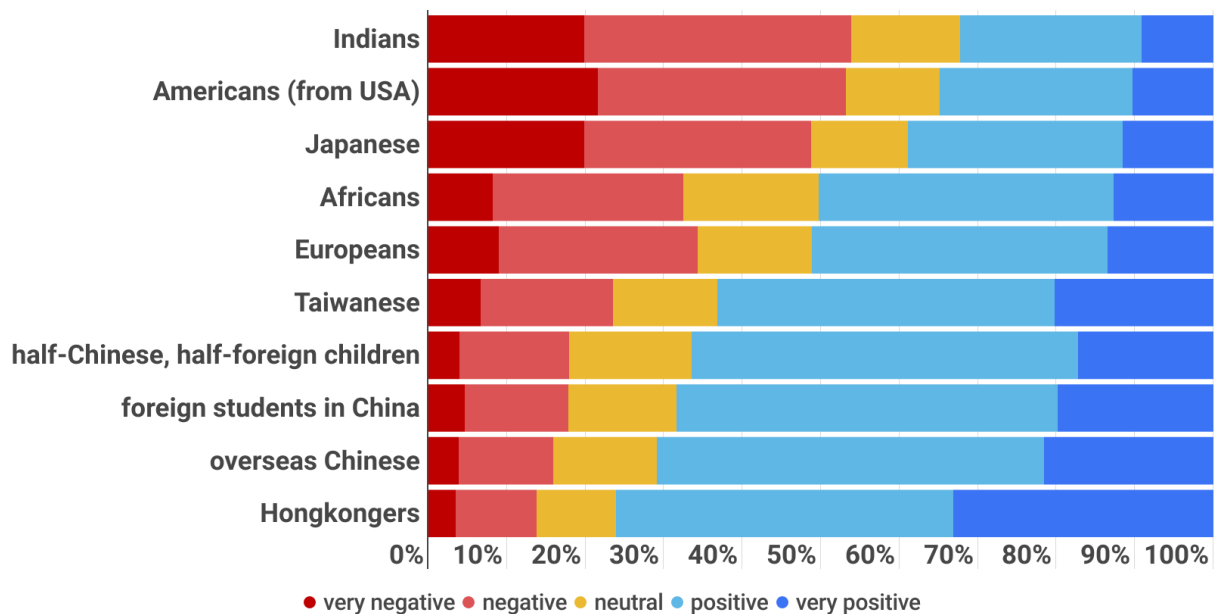
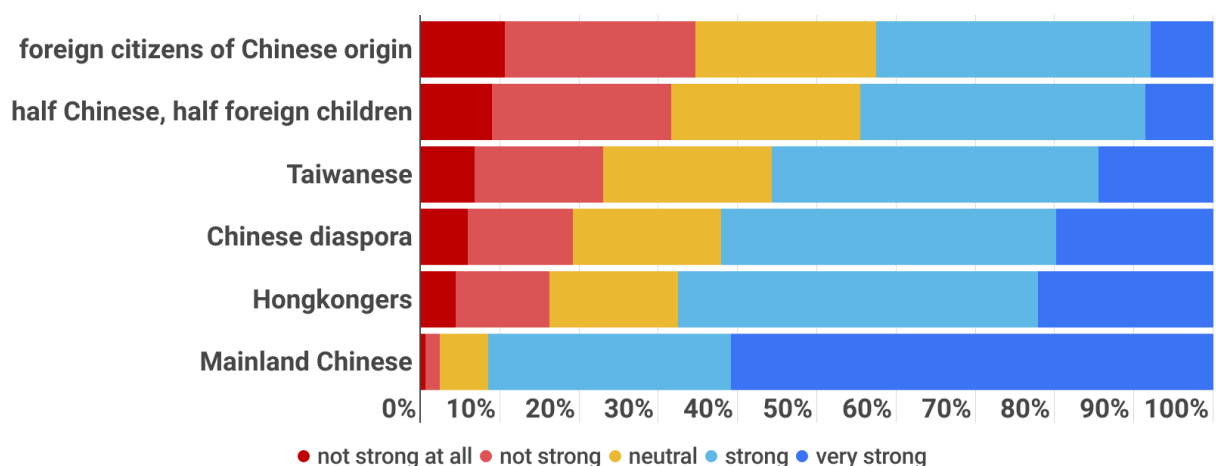


Figure 16: To what extent do you feel a sense of brotherhood with the following groups?



When it comes to traveling, Chinese people think that Russians and Hongkongers would be the friendliest toward them and Americans the least friendly. Taiwan, along with North Korea and Singapore, is in the middle, with many more people expecting friendly treatment than the opposite (see Figure 17).

On the subject of boycotts, Chinese people believe imported goods from Taiwan should be supported more than European, Japanese, or American goods. This may reflect that Mainland Chinese do not see Taiwanese imports as foreign (see Figure 18).

Figure 17: If you travel to the following places, to what extent do you think local people there are friendly to you?

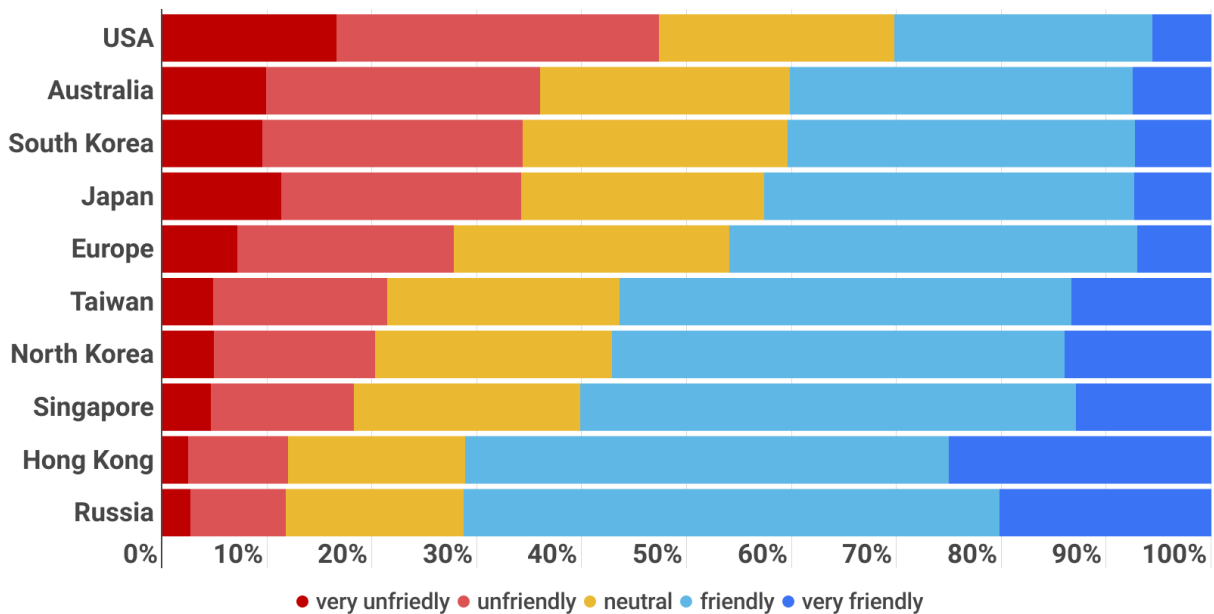
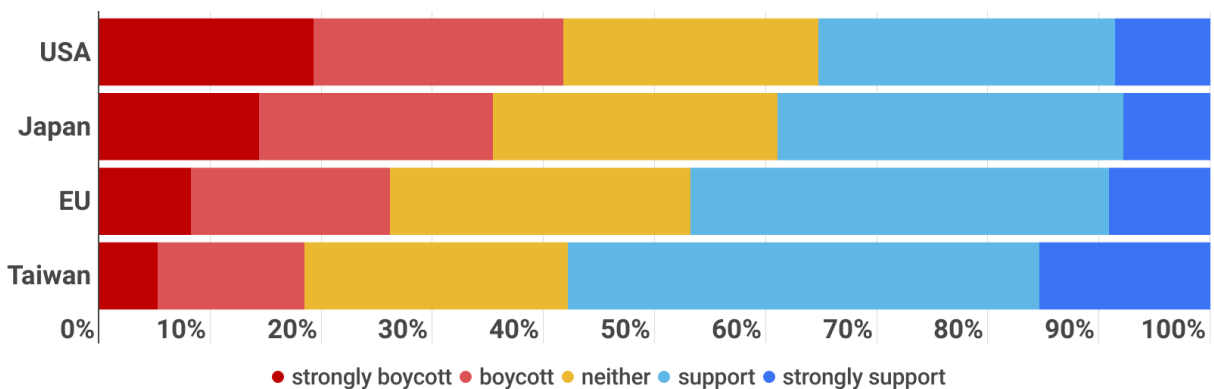


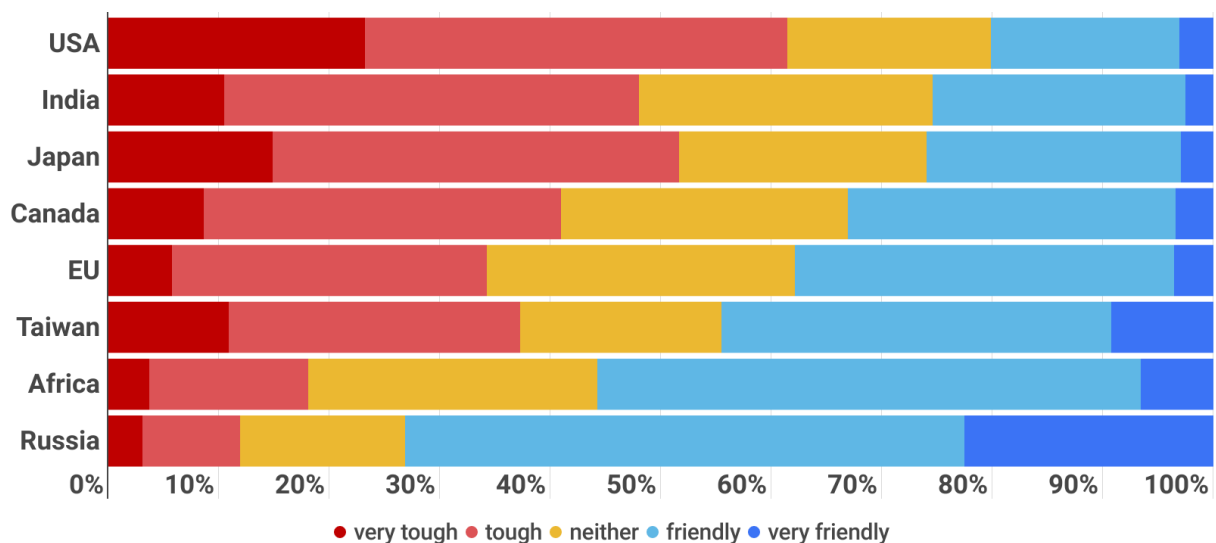
Figure 18: For the goods imported from the following countries and regions, to what extent do you think people should either support or boycott?



Chinese respondents were split between those favoring a tough approach to Taiwan and those favoring a friendly approach. The result arguably contradicts the idea of a hyper-nationalistic Chinese populace pushing the state towards military action on the issue – at least for the time being. Approximately 4 in 10 Mainland Chinese respondents favor a generally tough approach, but respondents in this cannot be assumed to support an invasion. Meanwhile, 60 percent indicated a preference for either a friendly or neither-friendly-nor-tough approach (see Figure 19).

The findings above offer a notable contrast between the Chinese public's preferences and the PRC party-state's hardline declaratory policy towards Taiwan. However, outside of Cross-Strait relations, popular foreign policy preferences largely echo the official rhetoric. A tough approach is favored against Canada, Japan, India, and the USA, – countries that have been subject to vitriolic official rhetoric. On the other hand, almost 75% of respondents said they wish to see a friendly approach to Russia, despite the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war.

Figure 19: For the following countries and regions, to what extent do you think the state should adopt either tough or friendly policies?



Endnotes

- ¹ Conducting public opinion surveys in Mainland China has its specificities due to the closed nature of the political regime controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Political and information control have tightened significantly since President Xi Jinping entered office in 2012, and especially since China-US relations shifted to a more conflictual form from late 2017. Since Covid19, China has also significantly restricted international travel. As a result, it has become even more difficult to investigate sentiments towards various international, political, economic, and other issues within China. While it is perhaps more important than ever to understand how China and the Chinese perceive various issues, we should also recognize that the current climate might make Chinese public opinion more unstable and politically constrained than usual.
- ² The data collection was coordinated by STEM/MARK, in cooperation with Cint. The questionnaire consisted of more than 300 data points, including a few open questions. The questions asked about various aspects of attitudes towards foreign countries, policy preferences, views about social and human rights issues, and basic demographics.
- ³ Turcsányi, R. Q., K. Kironka, A. Gerstl, M. Arnez, J. Čeněk, J. Chen, R. Chen, A. Chubb, P. Gries, T. Wang, 2022, "Sinophone Borderlands Indo-Pacific Survey", Palacky University Olomouc, 2022.
- ⁴ The data collection was coordinated by Focus Agency, in cooperation with Cint, Toluna, and Rakutan. The questionnaire consisted of more than 300 data points, including a few open questions. The questions asked about various aspects of attitudes towards foreign countries, consumer and cultural preferences, views about social issues, and basic demographics.
- ⁵ Turcsányi, R. Q., T. Wang, P. Gries, V. Vasekova, S. Yi, R. Qiaoan, K. Kironka, "Sinophone Borderlands Mainland China and Hong Kong Survey", Palacky University Olomouc, 2022.
- ⁶ The Australia Institute, "Polling - Australian and Taiwanese attitudes to China", August 2022.
- ⁷ This is suggested by a strong correlation between opinions of Chinese dissidents and low estimations of the prospects for China to become a democracy, examined later in this report.
- ⁸ In the Chinese survey, Taiwan was referred to as "Taiwan Province." Use of this label was a practical necessity only, and should not be taken to reflect the authors' views.
- ⁹ The option "Foreigners of Chinese origin" (外籍华人) refers to persons of Chinese origin having foreign citizenship. Chinese diaspora (旅居海外的中国人) refers to Chinese people residing outside China.

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About CEIAS

The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank based in Bratislava (Slovakia), and with branches in Olomouc (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria).

The main goal of CEIAS is to spread knowledge about Asia among scholars and experts in Central Europe and beyond, while also informing the public about Central European activities in Asia.

To this end, CEIAS conducts and publishes its research, organizes public seminars and conferences, supports education on Asian topics, and communicates with the local, regional, and international media.

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About Sinophone Borderlands

The Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges is an excellent research project based at the Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. The project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund, project no. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

The main idea of the project is to explore how the Chinese-speaking world interacts with other worlds, including those at its border (Slavophone, Tibetophone, Turco-Persophone, or Austroasiatophone worlds), as well as those who may be more distant (such as Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and others).

The Sinophone Borderlands research team consists of researchers from various disciplines under three main Research Groups - Political Science, Anthropology, and Linguistics. This allows for a cross-disciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural comparisons which pushes the academic studies of China and Asia beyond the limits of current disciplinary and national frameworks.

The Sinophone Borderlands is a research project that engages primarily in activities such as publishing academic journal articles, books, or participating in conferences and workshops.

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