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Chinese Reflections: Trump, Political Division, and the Unearned Privilege of American Exceptionalism

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This article explores how the Chinese public has discussed Donald Trump and the 2024 US presidential election. We base this paper on our own observations and conversations, coming from the joint perspective of an American Dane and a Chinese citizen, both living in Guangzhou.

We focus on Chinese people living in China rather than those living outside China. Although overseas Chinese opinions are important, they are overrepresented in the scholarly, policy, and popular cultural spheres outside China. We believe it is important to consider the public within China too.

American Politics at a Distance

Not many people in China pay close attention to foreign affairs. Although many people consume Western music and know something of everyday life in the USA, the details of American politics are little cared about or understood. China is a vast, heavily populated country: Domestic news and cultural products more than suffice for most people.

Even as the Chinese public becomes increasingly familiar with the USA, significant mutual knowledge gaps remain. The Biden administration's consternation over China's policy with respect to military conflict in Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza indicated a politically convenient (feigned) ignorance of China's longstanding policies of noninterventionism and the isolation of trade from other policy areas.[1] Although these wars are frequently reported on in the news and social media posts in China, most Chinese people perceive them as distant from their daily problems and concerns.

Even those who avidly engage with this media usually have only superficial knowledge of the wars that have so strongly impacted Western politics since 2022. We nevertheless find continued Western expectations for Chinese people to be familiar with Western politics, even as Western knowledge of Chinese politics remains scant. Most Chinese people are baffled about the significance attributed to China in American discourses concerning wars that are locally regarded as having nothing to do with China. The official rhetoric of China as a builder of world peace is accompanied by a broader public sentiment that China should keep out of other states' problems.

Who Cares About Trump?

As November 2024 approached, we struggled to find friends, peers, and loved ones interested in discussing the election. Such was Donald Trump's ability to capture attention that Kamala Harris was rarely mentioned (despite her Asian heritage), much less Tim Walz (despite his past China experience). Few people thought in terms of domestic or foreign policy differences, except to ruminate upon whether a Trump or Biden/Harris/third alternative presidency would be better for China. That is, the answer to what most Chinese people thought of the election is simply: not very much.

However, some Chinese people *did* care. Chinese people in the USA, particularly first-generation immigrants, play an outsized role in sinophone social media, having a complex effect on public opinion within China. Such overseas Chinese are divided in their opinions about Trump. Overseas Chinese who strongly advocate individual autonomy and whose focus remains on China itself tend to support Trump (as an opponent of the Chinese political system), while those who take more universalist approaches to individual rights and freedoms tend to oppose Trump (as an opponent of American democracy). Some overseas Chinese regard Trump's anti-China stance as bracingly truthful, while others seem to support him because he matches traditional Chinese models of patriarchy and masculinity. Opinions may combine in surprising ways. For example, some individuals simultaneously criticize the Chinese state (because they feel it suppresses individual freedoms) and appreciate Trump's opposition to Black Lives Matter (because they feel this social movement is Marxist, like the Chinese state).

Most such overseas Chinese discussions occur on Western social media, meaning that the only people in China who access them are those who both use VPNs and are sufficiently interested to seek out these conversations. Some in China find Trump's exaggerated personality and family dramas entertaining. In business circles, Trump may be admired as an ideal businessman who will boost the economy, potentially in contrast to Chinese government policies. Trump's emergent alliance with Elon Musk in the final months of the election campaign strengthened perceptions of his business acumen, and there was a social media flourishing of fake news and conspiracy theories in support of both Musk and Trump, sometimes mediated through overseas Chinese netizens.

Trump's disruptiveness in the USA appeals to some who are dissatisfied with China's political and economic system and wish for it to be disrupted too. Others support Trump because they believe his anti-China stance will ultimately produce greater individual rights and freedoms in China. Nevertheless, we also know people who are both horrified by Trump's impact on American democracy and are staunch supporters of China's own political and economic system: For them, the choice is not between left and right but between stability and chaos. This fits with the tradition of associating Chinese culture with one particular style of governance and Western culture with another. Some might see the collapse of the American political system as casting doubt on the robustness of the Chinese political system. Others who opposed Trump are concerned that the fall of American democracy could hinder desired political reforms in China. Still others cheer on Trump's destructive impulses because they feel the chaos demonstrates China's superiority over the USA.

Chinese opinions about Trump are thus linked with sentiment about Chinese politics but not in any consistent way. This highlights the difficulty in applying left–right binaries outside Western political contexts. China's lack of a clear left–right divide is obviously influenced by the limited political competition in China's formal governance processes. However, it is also related to the fact that the partly competing, partly coopted Chinese liberal intellectual traditions that developed over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are not straightforwardly aligned with Western political positions but instead address specifically Chinese priorities.[2]

Recall that the above opinions are limited to the small proportion of the Chinese public who actually think about American politics.

Beyond American Exceptionalism

The USA has a long history of invading, occupying, militarizing, and manipulating the politics of distant terrestrial and marine territories, increasingly in purported response to a diffuse "China threat."[3] The second Trump administration's proclaimed desire to control Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland and the Panama Canal, partly because of alleged Chinese activities, thus follows an established logic that is familiar to Chinese people. It has simply been a long time since the USA has targeted such aggressive rhetoric at a European (majority white) country like Denmark. Why should the Chinese public worry about the fate of American democracy or indulge in left–right divisions when the USA's foreign policy remains antagonistic to China, regardless of whether Democrats or Republicans are in power?

West-originating discourses of the "rise of the right," "global right," and "axes" of authoritarian leaders elide diverse political movements, philosophies, and processes. Although well intentioned, such discourses continually refocus attention on Western politics and epistemologies, recentring the West as the site of political perception and enunciation.[4] Despite the temptation to create binary categories between that with which one agrees and that with which one disagrees, the example

of China shows how difficult it is to define what "right" means from a global perspective. We resist the American exceptionalism in the idea that politics around the world are best viewed through the prism of American political divides. Chinese political thought must be interpreted from Chinese perspectives.

We believe publics in both China and the USA *should* care about the wellbeing of peoples *everywhere*. The USA has not earned the special privilege of being the political centre of the universe.

Notes

1 Dawn C. Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order* (Stanford University Press, 2022).

2 Tang Xiaobing and Mark McConaghy, "Liberalism in Contemporary China: Questions, Strategies, Directions," *China Information* 32, no. 1 (2018): 121–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X17749684

3 Adam Grydehøj et al., "Practicing Decolonial Political Geography: Island Perspectives on Neocolonialism and the China Threat Discourse," *Political Geography* 85 (March 2021): 102330, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102330

4 Yaso Nadarajah and Adam Grydehøj, "Encountering Folk, Knowledge, and Place," *Folk, Knowledge, Place* 1, no. 2 (2024): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.126717; and Adam Grydehøj and Ping Su, *China and the Pursuit of Harmony in World Politics: Understanding Chinese International Relations Theory* (Routledge, 2021).

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