Bridging the communication gap in EU-China relations: policy, media, and public opinion

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Abstract
Over the past decade, the series of crises in the EU, the rise of China, and the outbreak of the global pandemic have complicated contemporary EU-China relations. In this context, studies on the bilateral relationship have thrived. However, little is known how the complex relationship is reflected in the self-construction of one side through the understanding of the other. This special issue aims to contribute to this area. It consists of five articles, revealing the communication gap as seen from three perspectives, namely, official policy statements, mass media representations, and public opinion polls. Together, these sources provide empirical evidence on the different interpretations of “the other” in the reflection of “self” between the EU and China and the consequences they have caused. The special issue of this journal will shed light on the logical growth point and current soil of EU-China relations and help to promote mutual understanding and the establishment of mutual trust.

Introduction

An old Chinese saying asserts that nothing, not even mountains and seas, can separate people with common goals and ideals (志合者，不以山海为远). More than 700 years ago, The Travels of Marco Polo stirred the European imagination of the magnificent Orient; since 1975, China and the EU have built a friendship spanning the continents of Asia and Europe that has lasted nearly half a century. In 2003, the China-EU Strategic Partnership was established, opening a new chapter of an all-round cooperation; in 2013, China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a further aspiration to build connectivity between the two sides. However, EU-China relations, among the most important bilateral relations in international politics, have become increasingly complex in the past decade. Particularly, from the redefinition

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of systemic rivalry to mutual sanctions and the suspension of the CAI, the relationship between the EU and China has not, in recent years, developed as smoothly as expected. What are the obstacles affecting the development of bilateral relations and what is causing the increasing misunderstandings in the relationship?

In international relations, the perception of “the other” is used as a means to identify oneself, with self-affirmation as the central mechanism for internal development and the search for a further new global identity. The focus on “the other” became a major feature of postmodern Western trends of thought in the twentieth century. The “Orientalism” proposed by Said (1979) was an academic milestone in interpretations of the East as the most abstruse and exotic “other” in European culture. The understanding of “the other” is a way to better apprehend ourselves and at the same time to clarify the relationship between ourselves and “the other.” A deep understanding of the self and the other deserves our attention and reflection. As two major poles in a multipolar world, the EU and China can make great contributions to international peace and development as well as global governance. Therefore, the mutual understanding of the “self” and “the other” in these two parties is of great significance not only to bilateral relations, but also to global development. However, over the past decade, due to the different situations of the two sides and the changes in international politics, the EU’s and China’s perception and understanding of “self” and “the other” as well as their bilateral relations have also been changing.

Over the past decade, the EU has experienced a series of crises, which have brought challenges to its power as a global actor. For instance, during the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis of 2011–2012, there were even national defaults and national bankruptcies; the subsequent refugee crisis and terrorist attacks threatened the national security of the EU member states, and since 2016, events such as Brexit and the rise of populism have reflected the divisive tendencies within the EU. On the one hand, Europe’s influence over China has weakened (Ferenczy 2019: 4). On the other, at the EU institutional level, the EU adopted a much tougher line toward China than ever before. In 2016, 10 years after the EU last published its China policy, the EU issued “Elements for a new EU strategy on China,” aiming to set the framework for EU policy toward China over the next 5 years (European Commission 2016). Although the EU has maintained the continuity of its policies toward China, in its relations with China, it has paid more attention to a careful balance between interests and values, while paying particular attention to the impact of China’s rise. However, in 2019, the EU redefined China as its cooperation partner, negotiating partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival, in different policy areas (European Commission 2019). Hence, it can be argued that the EU-China relationship is entering a period of readjustment (Hackler 2020).

On the Chinese side, as it has developed, China has transformed itself into a global actor with a growing role both regionally and globally. The Chinese government released its second EU policy paper to define its EU policy objectives when the EU-China comprehensive strategic partnership enters its second decade in 2014 (China 2014). In December 2018, China published its third paper on policy regarding the EU, identifying the direction, principles, and specific measures to deepen the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the new era and promote greater development of China-EU relations. The background to this paper was that the EU
had announced its “strategic autonomy” and the USA had imposed trade tariffs on Chinese imports. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 at once reshaped the world. During the pandemic, the EU and China supported each other on the much-needed equipment (Chapuis 2020). Despite the global recession caused by the pandemic, China, surpassing the USA, became EU’s biggest trading partner in 2020. According to the EU’s statistical service, the bloc’s imports from China throughout the year 2020 grew by 5.6% year-on-year to 383.5 billion euros ($465 billion), and exports grew by 2.2% to 202.5 billion euros (China Daily 2021).

It can be seen from the above that although the EU and China have been closely engaged with each other and the bilateral relations are growing, misunderstanding and lack of effective communication sometimes trouble the relationship. The two sides need to bridge the communication gap and promote mutual trust.

Since political circles, the mass media, and public opinion are important sources of ideas for society, this special issue reveals the communication gap in EU-China relations from three sources of evidence, namely, official policy statements, mass media representations, and public opinion polls.

Bridging the communication gap in EU-China relations

The EU-China communication gap in official policy statements

The policy-making process of an international actor is multi-faceted, and the content of policy documents is a comprehensive product. It is the final outcome of a long process of decision-making and contains the interests and goals of this international actor. Generally speaking, the words and expressions in official policy documents are carefully considered and thoughtfully expressed. The wordings and statements not only represent the position of the issuer, but also indicate the attitude toward the issued. Furthermore, the content of official policy documents is public and cannot be changed once they have been released. If adjustments and updates are needed, they can be addressed only by issuing a new policy document.

Since the establishment of formal bilateral relations, the EU has published a series of policy papers vis-à-vis China. The wording and statements in the EU’s official policy documents on China not only indicate how the EU, as a whole with collective interests, sees itself, but also how it sees China as “the other” and their bilateral relationship in the context of international politics.

EU’s first China policy paper was published in 1995, but as far back as 1978 and 1985, the European Economic Community (EEC) and China signed two agreements on trade and economics, the latter of which still constitutes the main legal framework of the bilateral relations. In fact, economic and trade relations are the ballast of EU-China relations. Freeman (2021)’s contribution to this special issue uncovers the EU’s changing perceptions of China and the bilateral economic and trade relations in different stages of the EU-China relationship. He argues that from EU’s point of view, EU-China economic relations have moved from “equality” and “mutual advantage” to “growth” and “integration” during 1978 to the end of the twentieth century. During this period, the EU also actively supported China’s application to
be a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Kim 2000) and although the EU had noticed the trade deficit in favor of China, the EU thought it was not a major matter and could be resolved within the framework of the WTO.

Yet, 2003, Men (2021) argues, was a watershed year, for until then EU-China cooperation had been developing at full speed and the EU had been enthusiastic to see China’s rise and its commitment to reform and opening up; in contrast, in the years after 2003, along with the rising deficit in its trade with China and the growing impatience over China’s reform, the EU was getting increasingly agitated by China’s rise. Freeman (2021) reveals that in the EU’s 2001, 2003, and 2006 policy statements about China (European Commission 2001, 2003, 2006a), the relationship of China and the bilateral trade relations were defined as “partnership” and “imbalance.” However, the risk of China becoming a challenge to the EU emerged in 2006.

In the EU’s working document on trade and investment published together with the 2003 policy paper, it stated that China was “the single most important challenge for EU trade policy” (European Commission 2006b). To describe the conflict, Freeman (2021) pointed out that in the two most recent EU’s China papers published in 2016 and 2019, “cooperation,” “competition,” and “rivalry” were the terms in which the EU perceived China. On the one hand, the EU admitted the economic power of both parties and, hence, defined them as “two of the three largest economies and traders in the world” (European Commission 2016). On the other, the EU indicated that “there is a growing appreciation in Europe that the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted” (European Commission 2019).

Meanwhile, the Chinese government published three EU policy papers, one in 2003, one in 2014, and one in 2018 (China 2003, 2014, 2018), many fewer than the EU. The wording, statements, and focus in these policy papers were largely similar. Since these papers attached more importance to “cooperation,” “exchange(s)” and “dialogue(s),” while rarely answering the concerns from the European side, the EU and China can be seen as merely talking across each other rather than talking to each other (Men 2021).

All this demonstrates that the policy documents of both sides are just blindly expressing their own views, attitudes and positions, and not entering into dialogue of any kind with the other side. This has led to each side talking to itself, which, as a result, can only have widened the communication gap.

The EU-China communication gap in mass media representations

In international relations, it is the mass media which make a map of the world for decision-makers, for nobody, including those in government policy-making systems or diplomats, can have direct experience of the whole range of international affairs (Cohen 1963:12–13). Yet, the map of the world that the mass media constructs for us is a pseudo-environment (Lippmann 1922), which is not the “mirror” representation of actual conditions, but rather a construct displayed to people by the media through the selection, processing, and re-structuring of symbolic events or information. In this mediated society, the mass media have become a major source of information on international issues for both policy-makers and the general public.
Through the news production process, international affairs brought to the doorsteps (e.g., newspapers), living rooms (e.g., televisions), and palms (e.g., mobile phones) of individuals shape our understanding of international issues and the images of the global powers.

The news media play an important role in EU-China relations. Zhang (2011) explores the relationship between the media coverage of the two sides from 1989 to 2005 and the policy-making in EU and China during the same period, and argues that the media have not only helped to construct the images of both sides, but also fed into the policy-making process in the relationship between the EU and China. Many past studies have examined how Europe/European people and China/Chinese people have been represented and narrated as an ideological, political, economic, and cultural “other” in each other’s media (e.g. Cao 2006; Zhang 2016). However, if we examine closely the images of the EU and China as the “other” constructed by the media and their official rhetoric and statements of “self,” we can see a gap between the EU/Europeans and China/Chinese perception of themselves and the perception of them in the other side’s media. In this special issue, two articles reveal the gap in these self-perceptions and media representations. One examines the Chinese media coverage of the EU refugee crisis and the other examines the British media coverage of China after the Brexit referendum, before they both analyze their different concerns and the influencing factors in these reports.

The refugee issue in the EU during 2015–2017 was widely reported by the European media. It was often framed as a “crisis” and the refugees as “threats” to the European economy and society (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). However, the images that Chinese newspapers projected of the EU as a global actor against the backdrop of the European refugee issue indicate that the European political response/policy to the issue and European integration are the two themes mentioned most often in the Chinese coverage, while various themes related to crisis and threats either to national security, community, culture, or economy received far less coverage and are represented as less important in the Chinese news (Jiang et al. 2021). The authors further argue that, although to the EU and Europeans the refugee crisis discloses the institutional incompleteness and inefficiency of the EU, resurrecting memories of a divided Europe, in the Chinese media’s representation of the European refugee issue, an image is projected of the EU suffering from the refugee crisis, but still a strong global actor.

Wang (2021) compares the coverage of China by British left-leaning and right-leaning newspapers in the period 2017–2018. In the shadow of Brexit, both the UK and the EU need to re-construct their international relations, including their relationship with China (Whitman 2019). Although seeking new deals and relationships with China after leaving the EU is of great significance for the UK, in the four British newspapers that Wang (2021) surveyed, China was associated more with threats than with its role as a cooperating partner of the UK. The study also finds that, in its comparison between the left-wing and right-wing newspapers, the left-wing ones offer a more balanced coverage of China as a threat and as an economic power that the UK can trade with. Obviously, the image of China as a threat is contrary to China’s view of itself as a responsible power intent on peaceful development.
The media are the main sources of information for the public in understanding a foreign nation; however, there is always a gap between the global actor as represented in the media and the way that this actor sees itself. When there is such a communication gap between the two sides of a relationship in the media reports, might it cause a deeper misunderstanding and thus prevent the building of mutual trust?

**The EU-China communication gap in public opinion polls**

Politicians and diplomats are concerned about public opinion on domestic issues and foreign affairs, even though it is unclear how far public opinion affects government policies or vice versa (e.g., Sobel 2001; Chan and Safran 2006). A conditional theory of political responsiveness is proposed to show that government leaders can lead, follow, or even ignore public opinion, depending on the specific circumstances (Knecht 2014). While the jury is still out on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, in any case, we see that conducting surveys to gauge public opinion has become a regular concern of government departments and social institutions.

Of course, certain professional organizations offer their services to scientifically measure public views on a particular topic or series of topics. Examples include the Pew Research Centre, a non-partisan think tank based in Washington D.C., and YouGov, an international online research data and analytics technology group based in London. In Europe, the Eurobarometer is an official public opinion survey instrument launched by the European Commission in 1973. It now conducts surveys on behalf of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and other EU institutions and agencies to regularly monitor the state of public opinion in Europe on issues related to the European Union as well as attitudes on subjects of a political or social nature.

Public views of the EU and China on both sides have been studied. Some studies suggest that Chinese urban residents have a more positive attitude to the EU in general than to the USA, Russia and Japan (Zhang and Yu 2013; van de Noll and Dekker 2016), although, in terms of importance, China’s foreign relations rank Sino-European relations behind China-USA, China-Russia, and China-Japan relations. The EU’s role in the international arena is well recognized by the Chinese public, including the EU’s role in world peace, the global economy, environmental protection, poverty eradication, and counter-terrorism (Zhang and Yu 2013).

But Europe’s view of China has become very complex following the admission of so many new member states to the EU, especially since China’s promotion of the BRI in Europe and the establishment of the 16 + 1 cooperation mechanism between China and the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Some Europeans believe that the BRI and the 16 + 1 platform present opportunities for Europe due to the cooperation predicted in economic, trade, investment, infrastructure, and people-to-people exchange terms (Dimitrijevic 2017; Jakubowski et al. 2020). Some, however, due to differences in political systems and ideologies, are skeptical of China and have been speculating about the “China threat” (Ondrias 2018; Pavlicevic 2019). Furthermore, Kim et al. (2017) have argued that Europeans’ views on China correlate with their views on the USA; a person who likes the USA will also like
China, but if he has strong anti-American sentiments, then he will also have strong anti-Chinese sentiments. It has also been argued that negative attitudes to the Chinese government’s “wolf warriors” foreign policy in Europe since the new coronavirus epidemic can make Europeans prejudiced against local Chinese students, tourists, and communities, but conservative and progressive Europeans manifest these attitudes differently (Gries and Turcsanyi 2021).

Lai and Cai (2021) in this special issue examine whether the 16+1 platform and cooperative mechanism have changed the perception of China in the participating CEE countries. Using data from the “Future of Europe” series in the Eurobarometer and Pew Research Centre’s Global Indicator, the study finds that not only did the existence of 16+1 not widen the East–West division in the EU’s public opinion of China, but the communication and cooperation provided by the 16+1 mechanism have not generated a convergent view among the participating CEECs. In their public attitudes toward China, some participating CEE countries are friendly, some skeptical, some neutral, and some polarized.

Therefore, we can see that policy initiatives and cooperative mechanisms do not necessarily translate into benign public opinions. The willingness to cooperate between governments and the public perception of a policy once it has been implemented often do not coincide. Moreover, different perceptions are formed due to different values, needs, and the specific circumstances of a mechanism once it has been implemented. While this communication gap is inevitable, understanding public opinion also helps both partners to adjust their policies, mechanisms, and forms of cooperation appropriately.

Contribution of this special issue

The policy agenda, media agenda, and public agenda influence a society’s perception of a foreign nation (Manheim and Albritton 1984). The three dimensions of policy, media, and public influence the identity of international actors in their construction of the “self” and “the other.” In the development of bilateral relations, one party’s perception and evaluation of the other often reflects the perception of its own identity. Horskotte and Peeren (2007) contend that the construction of the EU as “self” in relation to an “other”—people inside and outside Europe—contributes to the formation of the EU’s foreign policy identity as a global actor. The complex development and changes in EU-China relations over the past decade have made it all the more necessary to understand how the two have positioned themselves and perceived each other. This special issue contributes to the understanding of the “self” and “the other” by the EU and China from the perspectives of official policy statements, mass media representations, and public opinion polls.

Through its five articles, this special issue reveals the communication gaps which have troubled the bilateral relations between the EU and China in policy documents, media reports, and public opinion. For, according to constructivism, the communication gap affects ideas, and ideas are important for cognitive and ideological formation, which is sometimes even more important than true discernment. It is hoped that this special issue will shed light on the logical growing point and current soil...
of EU-China relations and help to promote mutual understanding and the establishment of mutual trust.

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