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Against a Monolithic "Chinese Perspective" on Ukraine: Revisiting Responses from within China

Kristy Bryant
University of Oxford

As the war in Ukraine wages on, China watchers continue their observations on the Chinese responses to Russia's military assaults. Since its beginning, Western observers have been quick to jump to conclusions based on their assumptions about Sino-Russian relations and yet, while actions speak louder than words, it remains a challenge for many of them to describe precisely what China's stance is. There are a number of contributing factors that explain why it is problematic to stereotype China's position as Russia's ally and, for the most part, these are overlooked in favour of maintaining the dangerous East versus West, authoritarianism versus democracy binary. This essay raises concern with the trend of essentialist takes on particularly sensitive issues and contexts, like the war in Ukraine, and argues for more reflexivity, meticulous scrutiny of sources, and nuanced analysis so as to account for greater nuance in academic interpretations and beyond. Highlighting the issue of ununified and variable official statements and mainstream media and the rising popularity of alternative sources, particularly social media influencers, this piece argues for more consideration regarding the diversity of voices within China.

Keywords: Sino-Russian relations, China watchers, perspectives, social media, Wang Jixian

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February, China watchers' first reaction was to await China's official response (Yu, 2022). Given the historical significance of China-Russia relations, Beijing's reaction to, and official statement on, the war on Ukraine was of utmost interest to both scholars and non-academics alike. Nearing its eighth month at the time of writing, the war in Ukraine has revitalised a general shift and regression back toward binary modes of thinking within the international political sphere: between East and West, between democracies and authoritarian tyranny. The popular reaction to this conflict in the West has been an aggressive condemnation of Russian military aggression, accompanied by a celebration of Ukrainian resistance to occupation and dangerous comparisons to the situation with Taiwan (Haime, 2022). However, with such condemnation comes highly problematic discourses on Sino-Russian relations.

It has been observed, as found by the Carter Centre's US-China Perception Monitor (USCNPM), that "people with more exposure to national state media and social media have a higher level of support for Russia" (USCNPM, 2022). While observing this, it is crucial to note that there has been relatively slow, or mixed, messaging from Chinese state-affiliated media which may, to an extent, reflect hesitation, uncertainty, or tension. This piece calls into question the nature of such responses from what we understand as 'the Chinese perspective', including grassroots reactions on social media, and argues that it is incumbent upon the academic community to engage with the conflict in a way that avoids a return to a binary characterisation of the political world.

Though not inconsistencies as such, one might characterise the chronology of China's reaction to the war in Ukraine as being far from easy to read. Reflecting on the early days of the war, it has been argued that the apparent short notice given of President Putin's decision shocked not only the world but also those within his closer circles. In other words, while Putin's erratic behaviour leading up to the invasion may have been a clear signal to those in Ukraine, some China watchers have asked whether Putin's last-minute decision put his alliance with President Xi Jinping "under strain" (Görlach, 2022). This strain spotlights Sino-Russian relations as many Western observers rushed to conclude that, under the assumption that these countries share similar attitudes against Western hegemony, "Beijing [would] inevitably support Russia's military actions in Ukraine" (Yu, 2022). Initially, in the first week of the invasion, many noted how Beijing had not shown support for the Kremlin's move against Ukraine and was slow to make official statements (Yu, 2022). Yet, more recently, China emerged as an effective outlet for pro-Russia disinformation and propaganda as both Beijing officials and state media have echoed the Kremlin's messaging and justifications for invading Ukraine, "often parroting false claims about events while ignoring commentary from Kyiv" (Standish, 2022). There are two key points to consider regarding China's complex stance on Ukraine. Firstly, China has benefited from trade relations with Russia and Ukraine; while Kyiv served as a significant "source of grain and military equipment", the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine has led to significant economic losses for Russia's biggest trade partner, China (Yu 2022). Secondly, concerning the likening of Ukraine with Taiwan, it goes without saying that Beijing is observing "the West's willingness and resolve to respond" to Ukraine which, crucially, "may well serve as a reference to Taiwan later" (Yu, 2022). Thus, Beijing's initial, seemingly hesitant, response was perhaps indicative of China's self-reflections on their own actions, before rushing to make statements, and how the West would respond if Beijing went forward with its plans for reunification with Taiwan.

The USCNPM surveyed that 75% of respondents agreed that supporting Russia was in China's national interest (USCNPM, 2022). As "the first representative survey of online public opinion in China regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine", it revealed that "roughly 60% of respondents support China mediating an end to the conflict" (USCNPM, 2022). Crucially, while officials display pro-Russian stances, Chinese authorities claim "neutrality" (Luo & Li, 2022). Interestingly, they survey showed that "pro-war views seen in Chinese social media" actually "surprised many Chinese people" (Luo & Li, 2022). Furthermore, there have been several actions taken by Chinese media, which further call into question the nature of China's stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On 30 April, the same day as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's appearance, China's highest-ranking state media organ, Xinhua 新华社, made the puzzling decision to give Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba "uncensored space" to condemn the Kremlin (Luo & Li, 2022). While some simply concluded that these two interviews did not reflect any change in official foreign policy, this bizarre move from Xinhua was indicative of an evolving line for Beijing's propaganda that incorporated "Ukrainian viewpoints while aiming at the United States as the instigator of the conflict" (Standish, 2022).

In addition to these critical observations, Chinese social media is also an interesting understanding 'the Chinese perspective'. As Zhao Tong 赵通, a Beijing-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace senior fellow, observed on liberal voices in China, "[people] have become less capable to counterbalance against the growing influence of hard-line views" (Zhao, cited in Ni, 2022). On sites like Sina Weibo 新浪微博, social media platforms are pressured to cooperate with the official discourses from Beijing to "align their opinions", avoid "any anti-war, pro-Ukraine content", and "amplify the official voice and

prioritize posts sent by state outlets in users' interface" (Luo & Li, 2022). Despite government censorship, debates in China over the war in Ukraine have continued (Ni, 2022). On 12 March, the USCNPM released an article written by Professor Hu Wei 胡伟, the vice-chairman of the Public Policy Research Centre of the Counsellor's Office of the State Council. The article was a rare display of dissent against the official stance taken by Beijing and mainstream media. In it, Hu stated that not only should China not "stand with Putin" but "should take concrete actions to prevent Putin's possible adventures" (Hu, 2022). While the article can be found, it was censored on WeChat and the official USCNPM website was blocked in mainland China.

As the internet continues playing a central role in daily life, the extent to which governments, like China, "survey and censor citizens' online activities" will have "a lasting impact on grassroots participation" (Stoycheff *et al*., 2020: 485). Despite the masses of China's online 'hatriots', some social media personalities have survived, some of whom have gained a considerable following. One prominent example of this is the case of the Chinese software engineer-turned-vlogger, Wang Jixian 王吉贤, who receives very mixed reviews from Chinese netizens. Originally from Beijing, Wang is based in Odesa, the third-largest city in Ukraine, where he unknowingly "became China's newest citizen journalist" on the frontline (Barmé, 2022). Wang's videos revealed, for many in China, the reality — the concerns, fears, and experiences — of living in war-torn Ukraine. Consequently, Wang faced heavy criticism and denouncement from aggressive Chinese social media users; many accuse Wang of being a traitor, either "working for an alien power" or as "an actor paid to disseminate anti-China misinformation" (Barmé, 2022). Nonetheless, Wang has obtained a relatively significant following, with over 115,000 subscribers on YouTube alone. Sebastian Veg, who has written on grassroots activism in China, has observed that the public now relies on alternative sources of information, as opposed to mainstream media. *Minjian* 民间, meaning 'among the people', sources are "unofficial" and "self-organised" from within society, as opposed to being generated by state institutions which the public no longer wholly trusts (Barmé, 2022). Though it is not possible to know the extent of these sentiments, the fact remains that influential internet personas and bloggers, like Wang, have been able to garner attention, despite government censorship and surveillance. On Weibo, one blogger posted a poll asking how China should go about its relations with Russia. While the majority of respondents said that Beijing ought to support Moscow, "the most upvoted comments argued that, ultimately, China should focus on itself and on countering the U.S. in the long run" (Repnikova & Zhou, 2022). The implications of such activity and influence on social media will be difficult to monitor, though China watchers, near and far, will continue keeping an eye on such grassroots activity regarding public opinion.

For many observers, China's back-and-forthing, for lack of a better word, on the Kremlin's seemingly hasty invasion of Ukraine has caused much confusion in terms of understanding where Beijing stands and what its implications will be on China-West relations and, in tandem, Taiwan. By rushing to conclusions, based on scholarly or political assumptions, on such sensitive developments and issues as the war on Ukraine, we contribute towards the problematic and dangerous East-West and authoritarianism versus democracy binaries. While it might not be the main focus for all scholars and academics of China, at least to uphold academic rigour, it is reckless to jump to essentialist takes that perpetuate hostile caricatures and drives us further away from building dialogue. Increased engagement with non-Western voices and unconventional sources is fundamentally essential within the academic community at large — especially as it pertains to the Ukraine conflict — to adequately contextualise and add nuance to understandings of the international political sphere. However, this must be jointly undertaken with an effort to meticulously examine and

scrutinise the actions, abstentions, and seeming inconsistencies of countries that are deemed as uncooperative, unresponsive, or 'opaque'. The challenge of producing nuanced and holistic analyses is a big one that requires great patience and outside-the-box thinking. As China increases censorship and tightens its grip on freedom of speech, it is crucial that scholars work to adapt, scrutinise, and explore alternative sources like social media where the diversity of voices within China can be found.

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