

Opinions Toward the War in Ukraine among Global Chinese Communities: Diversities, Connections, and New Research Opportunities

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has triggered varying responses from people with Chinese heritage worldwide. These responses to the war highlight the diversities within global Chinese communities. They also serve as a lens through which we can observe how different Chinese communities intersect and interact through the internet and social media in a globalised world. This paper creates a few snapshots of juxtaposing opinions on the war in Ukraine among global Chinese communities. It identifies three preliminary patterns underlying these diverse opinions, pointing to directions for subsequent empirical studies. It also discusses how opinions toward the war in Ukraine expose the complex and complicated diversities and connections among global Chinese communities, calling for more scholarly efforts to situate Chinese studies within the global context.

Keywords: public opinion, global Chinese communities, the war in Ukraine, global Chinese studies, diversity in Chinese communities, connections between Chinese communities

The war in Ukraine has been one of the most significant international affairs in 2022. It has triggered varying responses from people with Chinese heritage worldwide. These responses to the war, sometimes in sharp contrast with one another, highlight the diversities within global Chinese communities. They also serve as a lens through which we can observe how different Chinese communities intersect and interact via the internet and social media in a globalised world.

As the war remains ongoing, people's opinions toward it can change rapidly as new developments unfold and information surfaces. Therefore, this paper does not intend to attempt the methodologically and practically impossible mission of comprehensively assessing the public opinion on the war across global Chinese communities. Instead, it creates a few snapshots of various opinions on the war among global Chinese communities. This paper then identifies three preliminary patterns underlying these diverse opinions, pointing to directions for subsequent empirical studies. Finally, it discusses how opinions toward the war in Ukraine expose the complex and complicated diversities and connections among global Chinese communities, calling for more scholarly efforts to situate Chinese studies within the global context.

At the time of the final editing of this article (mid-October 2022), Beijing has continued to refrain from condemning Russia's use of force in Ukraine. Formal announcements by the

PRC government regarding the war in Ukraine maintain a neutral position. However, some PRC officials have framed the war as “reverberating from military escalation triggered by the United States” (Repnikova & Zhou, 2022) and have portrayed the Ukrainian military as overrun by neo-Nazis (Kuo & Shepherd, 2022). Moreover, it has been revealed that “major state-run news media outlets ... have been largely echoing Russian state media stories or information from Russian officials” (McCarthy et al., 2022a). Social media platforms in China have also amplified official voices, “prioritis[ing] posts sent by state outlets in users’ interface” (Luo & Li, 2022). For example, on Weibo, arguably the most influential Chinese-language microblogging website, a hashtag related to the conspiracy theory that Ukraine houses American-funded biolabs had been viewed 180 million times by 10 March 2022, while a hashtag counteracting this claim had only been viewed 3,500 times (Kuo & Shepherd, 2022).

This pro-Russia information environment is generally effective in influencing public opinion in mainland China. For example, 75% of the respondents to an online survey conducted between 28 March and 5 April 2022 believed that supporting Russia in Ukraine is in the PRC’s national interest (UCPM, 2022). Similarly, a systematic analysis of half a million Weibo posts in February and March 2022 found that 50% of the posts attributed the cause of war to the West (Buckley 2022). However, public opinion on the war in Ukraine is far from uniform in mainland China. For example, five Chinese historians from the country’s top universities issued an open letter in late February condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Qiao et al., 2022). Likewise, Hu Wei 胡伟, an established political researcher in Shanghai, published an influential article in early March urging China to cut ties with Putin’s Russia (Hu, 2022). Even though these statements were quickly censored (Luo & Li, 2022), they demonstrate that not all Chinese citizens think and speak according to the official lines. In addition to fact-checking posts made by the official social media accounts of foreign organisations like the European Union and the French Embassy, Chinese university students and volunteers also provide resources and regular updates to combat disinformation surrounding the war (Kuo & Shepherd, 2022).

Public opinion towards the war in Ukraine differs significantly between Hong Kong and mainland China. As previously discussed, on the mainland, only a small number of primarily well-educated citizens have openly expressed their support for Ukraine’s resistance. Meanwhile, since the war started, a Ukrainian-owned restaurant in Hong Kong has seen new customers pouring in with donations and messages of support because many Hong Kong residents see “echoes of their pro-democracy struggle in Ukraine’s resistance against Russia” (Jakubec, 2022).

Diverse opinions on the war in Ukraine can also be found in overseas Chinese communities, including the 6,000 Chinese nationals living in Ukraine when the war started (Zhou & Zhou, 2022). Although many have since fled the country, some were stranded, and others have chosen to stay. For example, Wang Jixian 王吉贤, a programmer originally from Beijing who decided to remain in Odesa, regularly broadcasts his experiences in war-torn Ukraine via social media to show people back in China “what the real battlefield is” (Yeung & Xiong, 2022). Other Chinese citizens in Ukraine have voiced worries about “identify[ing]

themselves as Chinese” due to increasing local hostility, calling for people back in China to “show greater empathy” for the Ukrainian people (McCarthy et al., 2022b).

Many ethnic Chinese who are not PRC citizens have also expressed support for Ukraine. For example, on 10 March 2022, a group of Chinese Americans gathered in Manhattan’s Chinatown to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people (Chow, 2022). More remarkably, Ix Shen 沈倾, a Chinese-Singaporean former actor who emigrated to Ukraine, decided to return as a humanitarian volunteer after initially escaping to Poland with his Ukrainian wife. Shen related the killing of civilians in the Ukrainian town of Bucha to the Sook Ching massacre, an anti-Chinese operation carried out by the Japanese invaders eighty years ago in Singapore (Leo, 2022). However, it should not be assumed that all overseas Chinese hold similar views. For example, it is reported that the war has divided Australia’s Chinese community with heated discussions in chat groups and on social media platforms (Xing, 2022).

China’s official position has subtly shifted since the outbreak of war in February, especially as Ukraine took back Russia-occupied territories in September 2022. For example, in February and June 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping 习近平 made statements on reshaping the US-led international order with a Sino-Russian strategic partnership. However, observers have pointed out that while Beijing still wishes to reshape the world order, Xi refrained from explicitly mentioning its cooperation with Moscow to do so during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in September (Tiezzi, 2022). Likewise, people’s opinions toward the war in Ukraine among the global Chinese communities may change as the situation continues to evolve. For example, China’s backing away from its already nuanced support for Russia in late September appears to be accompanied by the emergence of anti-Russian narratives on Chinese social media in late September (Tiezzi, 2022).

Notwithstanding the constant dynamics in public opinion toward the war in Ukraine among global Chinese communities, three preliminary patterns can be identified from the existing observations by journalists and researchers. First, despite the shift mentioned above, the public opinion toward the war in Ukraine remains significantly more pro-Russia in mainland China than in Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities. Second, although public opinion in mainland China is generally pro-Russia, there exists a “critical minority... includ[ing] academics and professionals whose views carry more weight” (Buckley, 2022). Third, across global Chinese communities, many pro-Russia opinions during the war are linked to or driven by anti-Western sentiment rather than substantive support for Russia (Kuo, 2022; Repnikova & Zhou, 2022; Xing, 2022). These preliminary patterns should inspire empirical studies that place the relevant hypotheses under rigorous examination.

On the macro or aggregated level, the war in Ukraine could bring new opportunities to observe, examine, and analyse how public opinion is formed among Chinese communities under different sociopolitical circumstances. In particular, statistical analysis based on representative samples could reveal the extent to which public opinion towards the war differs between mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. Moreover, comparative list experiments could be applied to measure whether social desirability effects associated with the expression of views on the war differ significantly between mainland China

and other Chinese communities, providing insight into how censorship may shape public opinion.

On the micro or individual level, existing research has shown that personal characteristics such as age, gender, occupational sector, and religious belief may affect people's political efficacy (Liu et al., 2022). Likewise, empirical investigations could reveal how personal characteristics impact people's opinions on the war. Three sets of variables are worth particular attention. First, in mainland China, although a small group of well-educated intellectuals has formed a "critical minority" vocal in opposing the war (Buckley, 2022), a preliminary survey found that higher-educated respondents seemed to hold more pro-Russia views (UCPM 2022). Therefore, further systematic empirical studies are needed to examine how education impacts people's opinions toward the war in Ukraine. Second, several observers have suggested that the pro-Russia opinions among global Chinese communities are driven primarily by anti-Western sentiments rather than any substantive sense of affection for Russia (Kuo, 2022; Repnikova & Zhou, 2022). Subsequent empirical studies could examine this testable proposition by testing whether and how people's opinions toward the war in Ukraine correlate with their attitudes toward the United States and Russia. Finally, it has been argued that opinions toward the war in Ukraine among global Chinese communities are diverse "because people [have] different ideologies" (Xing, 2022). Therefore, subsequent empirical studies exploring whether and how people's opinion toward the war aligns with their positions in the ideological spectra of liberalism and nationalism could yield illuminating results.

Beyond inspiring the specific research agendas mentioned above, the war in Ukraine also invites researchers to reflect on the substance and extent of Chinese studies as an academic field. For example, existing research has demonstrated that the Chinese community in Australia is highly diverse, even though the Australian media and general public often neglect this group's internal complexities and nuances (Tao & Stapleton, 2018; Tao & Loo, 2022). Likewise, the significantly varying opinions toward the war in Ukraine within and between various Chinese communities across the globe should further remind Chinese studies researchers to notice the in-group and between-group diversities among global Chinese communities.

Furthermore, the formation and evolution of opinions toward the war in Ukraine highlights the connections between contemporary Chinese society in the PRC and overseas Chinese communities. For example, in the early days of the war, over 130 alumni of Chinese universities signed a petition condemning Russia, involving people residing in and outside China (Buckley, 2022). Meanwhile, some Chinese citizens in war-torn Ukraine experienced local hostility after the circulation of jokes insulting Ukraine on Chinese social media had negatively impacted many Ukrainians' perception of China (Hille, 2022). It has also been suggested that "the propaganda from Beijing was influencing Chinese Australian migrants" and their views on the war in Ukraine (Xing, 2022).

To understand these recent phenomena and many other aspects of the opinions toward the war in Ukraine held by people with Chinese heritage around the world, researchers need to consider how various Chinese communities across the globe are interconnected and impact one another. In today's globalised world, geographic and political boundaries should no longer

divide subfields of Chinese studies. Instead, we need to situate Chinese studies within the global context, look beyond a few specific communities of people with Chinese heritage, and pay more attention to the connections and interactions between these communities. The analysis of opinions towards the war in Ukraine is one example that offers a unique lens into the complexities of Chinese heritage groups within and beyond mainland China – complexities that all scholars of Chinese studies should consider.

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