

# An Analysis of Chinese Leaders' Images Towards the United States During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper provides a preliminary analysis on how Chinese leaders perceive the United States during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The author borrows the concepts of strategic culture provided by Andrew Scobell (2014). Scobell asserts that “two faces of strategic culture” affect Chinese leader images and perceptions. The first face of strategic culture is concerned with a country’s self-image – the perceptions and realities of its dominant strategic traditions and how these interact and produce outcomes. The second face of strategic culture involves the image of other countries. Scobell argues that Chinese leaders tend to view their strategic tradition as the “Great Wall” strand of strategic culture, and therefore it shows “active defense” in nature. Chinese leaders tend to describe other states as more focused on aggressive and disreputable intentions in relation to China. This author uses pattern-matching research methodology and compares the theoretical pattern and the observed pattern. The data were collected from Chinese leaders’ speeches and government websites. The author codes and analyzes the data based on the conception model. Based on the empirical findings, this author confirms two strategic culture faces during the pandemic that affect Chinese leaders’ images. The result shows that Chinese leaders tend to have negative images towards the United States.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese leaders’ images, strategic culture, US-China relations

## Introduction

The US-China relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. As the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) spreads worldwide, the US-China relations drew the world’s most attention as their rivalry continued in 2020. The trade war and many other issues flared the tensions between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which deteriorated their relations in the same year. Many scholars have offered analysis about US-China relations in 2020. Thomas Christensen describes the US-China relations during the COVID-19 pandemic as “a potential tragedy for the world” (Christensen 2020). Ryan Hass argues that the US and China are “in search of a new equilibrium” (Hass 2020). Boylan et al. argue that Chinese political leaders resented the lack of global political status equal to rapid economic growth and rising military might. They strived to uphold their international reputation and demanded more respect for the sphere of influence, and they mobilized against US threats to Chinese sovereignty (Boylan, McBeath, and Wang 2020).

Nevertheless, one important gap in the research is how Chinese leaders perceive the US-China relations during the pandemic from an empirical analysis of Chinese leaders’ perception during the pandemic. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the empirical pattern of Chinese leaders’ images toward the United States. To draw theoretical implications, this author compares the empirical results with the theoretical perspective using pattern-matching analysis. The arrangement of the paper is as follows. First, this paper provides an account of research methods and data collection. Second, the author develops the theoretical pattern based on the work of Andrew Scobell (2014) as the key concepts. Next, the author conducts an empirical analysis and finally compares the empirical results to the theoretical pattern in the discussion section.

## Methodology

The research question is “how Chinese leaders perceive the US-China relations during the pandemic?” The hypotheses are first, Chinese political leaders tend to depict self-image as peaceful and defensive; second, they tend to perceive that the US has a hostile, offensive, and aggressive attitude toward China. This author conducts qualitative single-case study research and uses pattern matching analysis to analyze the case. Pattern matching involves linking two patterns where one is a theoretical pattern and the other is an observed or operational one (Trochim 1989). In other words, pattern matching is a logic that compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one made before you collected your data (Yin 2009, 143). A theoretical pattern is a hypothesis about what is expected in the data. The observed pattern consists of the data used to examine the theoretical model (Trochim and Donnelly 2001). The author has conceptualized the concepts in the above section and translated them into a specifiable theoretical pattern. The author collects and measures the empirical data and translates them into an observed pattern. The inferential task involves relating, linking or matching these two patterns. To the extent that the patterns match, one can conclude that the theory and any other theories which might predict the same observed pattern receive support (Trochim and Donnelly 2001).

The data were collected from original texts and Chinese Communist Party official publications. The author used keywords search from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. The searched time range is from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020. The author carefully selected relevant official statements and interviews for analysis. In total, the author collected fifteen official statements/interviews regarding US-China relations. Next, this author coded the data and analyzed the data using MAXQDA software. In qualitative research, coding is “how you define what the data you are analyzing is about” (Gibbs 2007). MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative methods of data and text analysis. Finally, the author analyzed the codes and organized the results as an observed pattern to compare with the theoretical pattern.

Since this is a preliminary study, this study needs to point out some research limitations. First, although the author searched and selected the most relevant data for analysis, the small sample size may affect the validity. Second, the theoretical argument would be simplified and lack a thorough theoretical explanation. Third, the coding process and results interpretation could be biased.

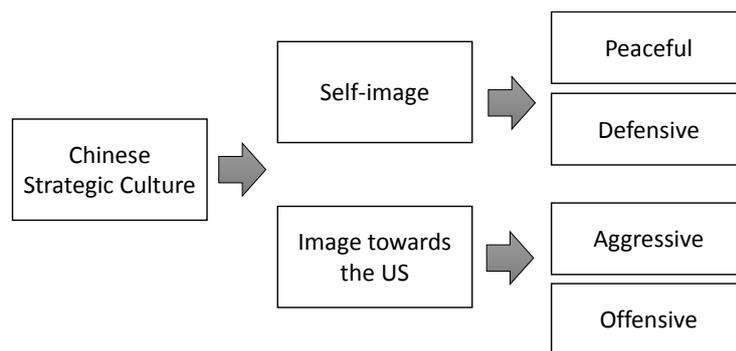
## China’s Strategic Culture and Leaders’ Images: Theoretical Pattern

Strategic culture is an important approach to examine political leader’s perceptions. Strategic culture can place severe constraints on elites’ ability to undertake strategic adjustment to systemic changes (Lin 2019, 211). Specifically, as Kupchan observes, decision-making elites can become trapped by strategic culture, preventing them from reorienting grand strategy to meet international imperatives and avoid self-defeating behavior (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Scholars often debate on what Chinese strategic culture entails (Lin 2020, 66). Chinese traditional strategic culture tends to describe that China’s Confucian tradition was a key determinant, and therefore, China’s foreign policy favors harmony over conflict and defense over offense (Kierman and Fairbank 1974). Other literature focuses on Realpolitik, for example, the work of Sun Tzu’s Art of War, which stresses offensive nature and the Chinese predisposition for stratagem over combat. Johnston (1995) identifies the existence of two strands of Chinese strategic culture: a “Parabellum” (or Realpolitik) and a “Confucian-Mencian”; although two strands existed, only one - the Parabellum strand - was operative, and the other was purely for ‘idealized discourse.’ Johnston argues that Chinese realism stems from ideational sources rather than structural factors (Johnston 1995).

Andrew Scobell (2014) argues that strategic culture has a major effect on the national leaders’ decision making and how they perceive themselves and their actions and others. Therefore, there are two faces of Chinese strategic culture. The first face of strategic culture is concerned with a country’s self-image (the perceptions and realities of its own dominant strategic traditions and the policy outcome they produce). The second face of strategic culture involves the image constructed by the Chinese leaders towards other countries (Scobell 2014, 52). Based on this logic, Scobell posits that Chinese leaders tend to view their strategic culture as peaceful and defensive. In the meantime, they tend to focus on the aggressive and nefarious intentions of other states concerning China (Scobell 2014, 53). Scobell argues that Chinese leaders tend to view their strategic tradition as the “Great Wall” strand of strategic culture, and therefore it shows “active defense” in nature. Regarding the United States, Chinese leaders tend to characterize the US as “possessing a warlike and offensive-minded military disposition that is part of a broader expansionist, maritime, and materialist strategic culture,” and Chinese leaders tend to define their own strategic culture as “pacifistic and defensive-minded” (Scobell 2002, 17, 2014, 54).

Based on Scobell’s work, this paper argues that four indicators can be used to capture Chinese leaders’ self-image and image towards others: peaceful, aggressive, defensive, and offensive. Those four indicators refer to the patterns of state leaders’ interpretation of their own country and other countries. This author defines a peaceful image as the image that a state’s political, economic, and military power would not threaten international peace or other states. An aggressive image is defined as the image that a state’s political, economic, and military power would threaten international peace or other states. A defensive image is an image that a state’s behavior that aims to maintain moderate policies to attain the necessary security. An offensive image shows that a state’s behavior aims to seek excessive power to reach regional or global hegemony. Those indicators are not mutually exclusive and could exist in a leader’s perception at different times.

Applying Scobell’s theoretical concept and the typology of images that this paper develops, the theoretical argument of Chinese image patterns is: China’s self-image tends to be “peaceful” and “defensive,” and its image towards the US tends to be “aggressive” and “offensive.” The theoretical patterns can be visualized as the figure below:



**Results: Observed Pattern**

The author observed and evaluated the data and also paying attention to their contents and accuracy. The researcher has determined whether the data is suitable for analysis. This researcher analyzed the collected documents, which were determined as pieces of evidence. This researcher used the analysis tools provided by MAXQDA to analyze the coded segments. In total, this researcher has produced a total of 93 codes from the fifteen documents, in which 55 codes associating the key patterns are used for analysis.

Table 1. Number of codes in each pattern

| Image patterns | Self-image | Image towards the US |
|----------------|------------|----------------------|
| Peaceful       | 11         | 2                    |
| Aggressive     | 0          | 15                   |
| Defensive      | 16         | 1                    |
| Offensive      | 0          | 10                   |

*Made by the author*

The above table provides an overview of the codes. From the table, we can observe that Chinese leaders do not see China as an aggressive and offensive country. Instead, they perceive themselves as a peaceful and defensive country. On the other hand, Chinese leaders tend to perceive the United States as offensive and aggressive, and the US takes unfriendly actions against China.

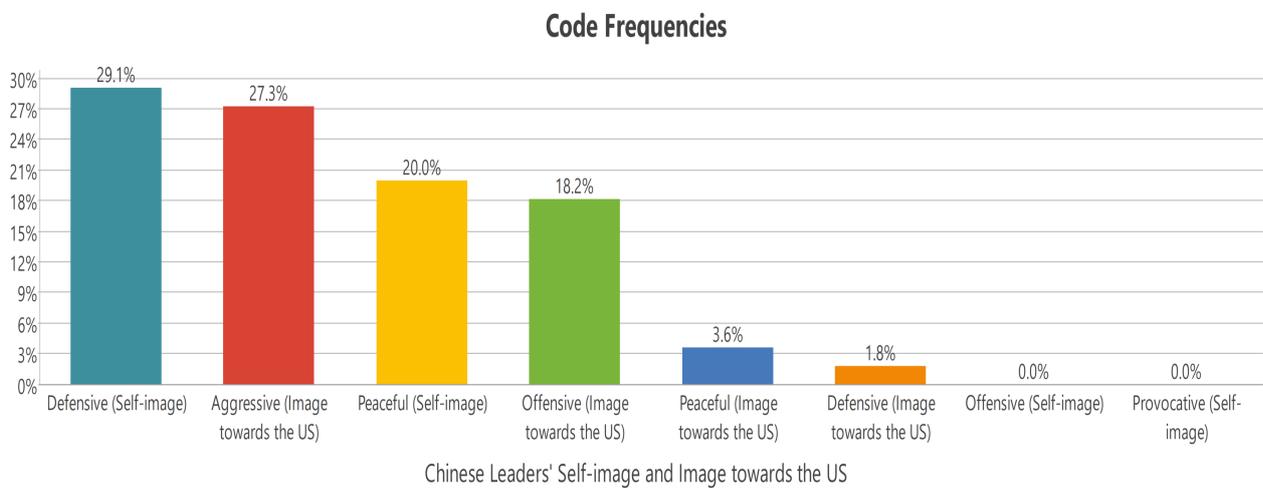
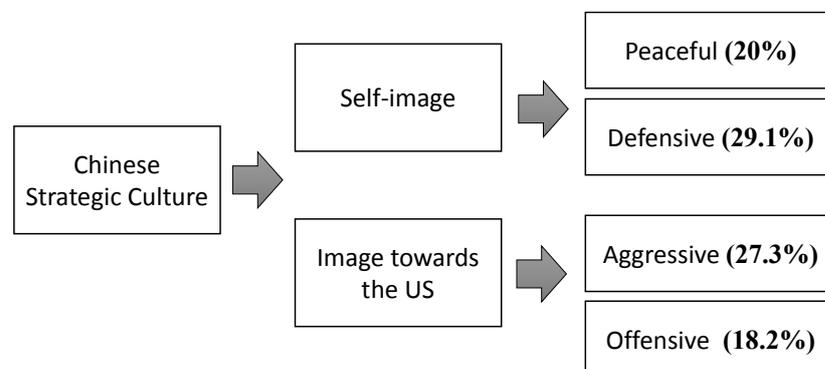


Figure 2. Code Frequencies

Figure 2 indicates the code frequencies of the observed evidence. The result shows that Chinese leaders stress the defensive pattern of self-image (29.1%), followed by the aggressive image towards the US (27.3%), the peaceful pattern of self-image (20%), and the offensive image towards the US (18.2%). The rest of the codes are below 10%. Based on the result, the empirical pattern of Chinese leaders' images can be drawn as follows:



## Discussion

The above result shows that the empirical evidence confirms the conceptual model based on Scobell's work. In the year 2020, Chinese leaders have a higher self-image of defensive pattern and tend to portray the US as an aggressive country against China. Chinese leaders always state that China is a peaceful country with a defensive foreign policy. At the beginning of the pandemic, the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed the cultural tradition of Chinese philosophy that "sees the world as one big family," which prevents China from an aggressive and offensive country. He stated:

*"Given its cultural traditions, China will not seek hegemony even when it grows in strength. What we have chosen is the peaceful development of our own country and mutually beneficial cooperation with the world. The path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which has underpinned China's remarkable success, is brimming with vitality and leading to an even more promising future."* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020a)

Based on this logic, Wang states that China will never intend to challenge or replace the US but grow US-China relations with consistent and stable foreign policy. China will act defensively and "uphold its sovereignty, security, and development interests, safeguard the achievements that the Chinese people have made through hard work, and reject any bullying and injustice imposed on it" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020b). Therefore, China would not swallow any arbitrary and unscrupulous US moves. China's countermeasure is "legitimate, justified and lawful, and it fully conforms to diplomatic norms" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020c).

Regarding image toward the US, Chinese leaders tend to believe that the US takes an offensive and aggressive stance against China. At the beginning of the pandemic in February, the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi state in an interview that "I am afraid that the United States has its own dark intentions sometimes. It doesn't want to see other countries develop. It doesn't want to see other countries' businesses grow and succeed. It has been spreading rumors to smear other countries' businesses" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020d). In the same interview, Wang further gives examples about how the US has been showing its offensive and aggressive postures:

*"China's National People's Congress has never introduced any bill on the internal affairs of the United States. However, the US Congress has reviewed and adopted one bill after another that blatantly interferes with China's internal affairs. China has never sent its military vessels and aircraft to the neighborhood of the United States to flex muscles. Yet, the US naval ships and airplanes have been flexing muscles at China's doorsteps...So talking about threat, it is not that China is threatening the US, but the US is threatening China. And the issue is how to address the US threat to China..."* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020d)

Wang even refers to the US aggressive attitudes as a "political virus" with "ideological biases" that has been "spreading in the US and jumping at any opportunity to attack and slander China. Some politicians ignore the basic facts and make up countless lies and conspiracy theories concerning China..." (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America 2020). Wang emphasizes that some politicians in the US portray China as an adversary and even an enemy. The US needs to "develop more objective and cool-headed perceptions about China, and a more rational and pragmatic China policy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China. 2020b). Wang believes that the US's current China policy is based on ill-informed strategic miscalculation and is fraught with emotions and whims and McCarthyist bigotry (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020e). If the US continues to do so, it will damage US credibility and

jeopardize world peace and stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020f).

Unlike the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who usually speaks explicitly about the US-China relations, President Xi Jinping uses a softer voice over the same issues. In the phone calls with President Donald Trump, Xi stresses cooperation and joint efforts. The US and China should maintain communication and strengthen cooperation on various issues, especially the Covid-19 pandemic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020g). Xi underscores that the year 2020 is an important juncture for US-China relations. Xi hopes that the US will take substantive steps to improve the relationship and work with China. This will contribute to building a relationship based on non-conflict or confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2020h). After Joe Biden was elected as the president, Xi reiterates his stance that the two sides should uphold the spirit of non-conflict, non-confrontation, and focus on cooperation, manage differences, advance the healthy and stable development of China-U.S. ties (The Guardian 2020).

## Conclusion

This paper confirms the “two faces of Chinese strategic culture” provided by Andrew Scobell (2014) matches with the empirical study. Using the pattern-matching analysis, the findings prove that the theoretical pattern of the Chinese leaders’ images matches with the observed pattern. Chinese leaders view themselves as peaceful and defensive, which is based on traditional cultural philosophy. On the contrary, Chinese leaders tend to characterize the United States as more focused on aggressive and offensive intentions in relation to China. The evidence can be found in Chinese leaders’ speeches and statements. The result shows that Chinese leaders tend to have negative images towards the United States. Therefore, although Chinese leaders call for cooperation and joint efforts to strengthen cooperation on various issues, they also stress that China will uphold its sovereignty, security, and development interests and reject any bullying and injustice that the US imposes on it. This type of active defense is also consistent with Scobell’s term - the “Great Wall” strand of strategic culture.

## Appendix: List of data collected from the Chinese government websites

| # | Date        | Title   | Source                                 |
|---|-------------|---|--|
| 1 | February 7  | President Xi Jinping Had a Phone Call with US President Donald Trump                          | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 2 | February 15 | Transcript of State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Exclusive Interview with Reuters | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 3 | February 15 | <i>A. Bringing the East and West Together In Shared Commitment to Multilateralism</i>         | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 4 | February 15 | Wang Yi: It Is the US, Rather Than China, Is Threatening Others                               | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 5 | March 27    | President Xi Jinping Speaks with US President Donald Trump on the Phone                       | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 6 | May 25      | State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press                                  | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |

|    |             |   |  |
|----|-------------|---|--|
| 7  | July 9      | State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Delivered Remarks at the China-US Think Tanks Media Forum  | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 8  | July 9      | Stay on the Right Track and Keep Pace with the Times to Ensure the Right Direction for China-US Relations                                       | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 9  | July 24     | Wang Yi: The Current Difficulties in China-US Relations Are Completely Created by the US Side   | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 10 | August 6    | Interview on Current China-US Relations Given by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Xinhua News Agency                             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 11 | November 25 | Xi congratulates Biden on election as US president  | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 12 | December 7  | Wang Yi Holds a Videoconference with a Delegation of Board of the US-China Business Council   | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 13 | December 18 | Wang Yi Holds Videoconference with Asia Society   | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 14 | December 19 | Reorient and Steer Clear of Disruptions For a Smooth Sailing of China-U.S. Relations  | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |
| 15 | December 11 | Serving the Country and Contributing to the World: China's Diplomacy in a Time of Unprecedented Global Changes and a Once-in-a-Century Pandemic | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC |

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