

American Attitudes toward Japan and China, Decades of Polls

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Abstract

Gathering polling items about China and Japan from 1937 to 2011, we examine how Americans think about these two powerful East Asian countries. Our study investigates American attitudes from two perspectives. First, we analyze the content of polling items asked in the US about China and Japan to track changes in salient issues over a period of over 60 years. Second, by tracking repeated items, we show how American attitudes toward China and Japan have changed over time, both in long-term general favorability, and shorter-term perception of geopolitical, ideological, and economic threat in response to historical events.

Key Words:China, Japan, United States, Economy, Polling, Public Opinion, Trends, Favorability, Public Sentiment, Public Perception

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A vast amount of data on attitudes and opinions of Americans toward Japan and China exist from polls conducted over the more than seven decades since the late 1930s. First, the content of the questions themselves are useful data points for tracking the salience of various economic, political, and ideological issues with regard to China and Japan. Second, select response data from these poll questions illustrate correlations between geopolitical events, perceived economic power, and short term threat as well as trends in overall, long-term favorability toward Japan and China. This discussion is important for thinking about policy implications and future relations between nations and is particularly relevant given the concern over the global economic and strategic environment.

Background

Previous research on American attitudes toward China and Japan has largely focused on explaining individual level characteristics associated with a particular attitude toward China or Japan. Page, Rabinovich, and Tully (2008) analyze a number of public opinion surveys between 1978 and 2006 in order to identify an aggregate feeling: American feelings toward China are “rather lukewarm or slightly cool, nearly neutral” and toward Japan, “warm.” Page et al. find that higher levels of formal education and “internationalist attitudes” are associated with more positive feelings. This focus, however, overlooks the dynamic state of American attitudes toward Asian countries, and belies the reality that attitudes fluctuated much more during the 20th century than did levels of formal education and “internationalist” sentiments.

Gries and Crowson (2010) also focus on explaining attitudes—in this case about the rise of China—in terms of individual characteristics like party affiliation and political identity. Their paper finds that conservatism is associated with an increased likelihood to perceive the rise of China as a threat to the United States. Gries and Crowson capture the determinants of individual attitude toward the rise of China, but in focusing on individuals, forego the ability to explain change over time. To explain why Americans feel a certain way about a certain country—and to explain how and why attitudes change over a period of more than half a century—requires more than looking

at individual and demographic characteristics. It also requires taking the political and social context of the time into account.

Methods

For our research and data collection, we relied on the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research iPoll Databank. From the Databank, we gathered polling items from 1937 to 2011 for Japan and China by searching their country names. The searches resulted in nearly 2,400 polling items for China and over 2,600 for Japan. The results included public opinion polling items on politics, policy matters, and personal tastes gathered from surveys conducted by Gallup, Harris, NORC at the University of Chicago, ABC and CBS News, and the Associated Press, among other organizations. Table 1 shows the number of polling items by country and decade.

Table 1

Number of polling items available by country and decade

China		Japan	
Decade	Questions	Decade	Questions
1930s	18	1930s	30
1940s	131	1940s	360
1950s	220	1950s	30
1960s	105	1960s	13
1970s	403	1970s	105
1980s	261	1980s	859
1990s	455	1990s	986
2000s	620	2000s	164
2010s	178	2010s	88
Total	2391	Total	2635

Results

First, broad trends emerge from the content of the questions asked about China and Japan between 1937 and 2011. These trends reflect American elite perception of the social and political global environment as well as U.S. interests abroad. From 1939 to 1945, for instance, war with the United States was the dominant topic for polling items about Japan. Other common questions followed the same trend. Following the war, the focus lied in

measuring attitudes about Japan's relationship with Germany and the U.S. occupation of Japan. From the mid-1970s through the 1990s, questions about Japan focused on three central themes: communism and Japan's relationship with the Soviet Union, oil and trade between the United States and Japan, and the continued U.S. military presence in Japan. The themes in polling items over the past 20 years have been international strength, relative economic power, and competition more generally. Over the same time period, many polling questions have asked about Japan's relationship to North Korea.

Since the end of World War II, a central theme in poll items about China has been communism. From the end of World War II through the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in the early 1970s, a number of questions focused on western involvement in Southeast Asia, including the French Indochina war before 1954, and American involvement in Vietnam from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. In the same time period, many questions focused on Chinese foreign policy including: the situation in Taiwan, China's role in Vietnam, and whether China should be admitted to the United Nations. As with Japan, many polling items asked about trade, relative economic strength, and competition. With China specifically, economic poll items were commonly phrased in terms of China being an "economic threat." Additional themes were the trade deficit and immigration, neither of which was prominent in questions about Japan during the same period. Recently, focal points have been nuclear weapons and whether or not China is perceived as a military threat. Throughout the entire sample period, poll items about China have consistently asked about human rights abuses and anti-democratic government behavior.

A third category of poll items asked Americans to compare Japan and China to each other and to the United States on a variety of issues. These overlapping questions mostly focused on relative strength and propensity for international cooperation. Several of these questions examine American attitudes toward the United States' diplomatic and military role in Asia. In 1999 for example, one question asks which country respondents think holds the key to peace and security in Asia – Japan, China, or the United States. 51% of respondents chose the United States, followed by China at 32% and Japan at 11% (Table 2). In the same Harris survey, when asked which country should ideally have the most influence

on the Asian economy in the future, 38% of respondents chose the United States, followed by Japan at 32% and China at 23% (Table 3).

Table 2

Attitudes toward US presence in Asia

Harris: "Which country do you think holds the key to peace and security in Asia--Japan, China, or the United States?"

	1999
Response	%
Japan	11
China	32
United States	51
Don't know/Refused	5
N	1009

Table 3

American opinions on the future of the Asian economy

Harris: "Which country do you think should ideally have the most influence on the Asian economy in the future—Japan, China, or the United States?"

	1999
Response	%
Japan	32
China	23
United States	38
Don't know/Refused	6
N	1009

While some poll items were only asked on one occasion, a number of 'baseline' items were repeated over a long period of time. By tracking repeated items, we can show how American attitudes toward China and Japan have changed over time, both in short term attitudes about specific issues, and in long term general favorability. One of the most dramatic short term trends was the change in attitudes about economic might during and after the global financial crash in 2008. Before the crash in 2008, a high of 48% of Americans responded that the U.S. was the leading economic power, followed by China at 26% and Japan at 10%. Three years later in 2011, China was the top choice at 43%, followed by the U.S. at 38% and Japan at 6%. In 2000, when asked which country

they expect to be the world’s leading economic power in 20 years, 55% of respondents chose the United States, with China at 15% and Japan at 13%. When the same question was asked in 2011, China was the top choice at 47%, the U.S. had dropped to 35%, and Japan was at 5% (Table 4).

Table 4

Leading economic power

Princeton Survey Research Associates: “Today, which one of the following do you think is the world's leading economic power?...The United States, China, Japan, the countries of the European Union”

	2008	2011
Response	%	%
China	26	43
United States	48	38
Japan	10	6
European Union	10	6
India	-	-
Russia	-	-
Other/No opinion	8	6
N	1000	1001

Another trend in polling data is that Americans do not conflate economic and political dominance. Interestingly, in 1994, when asked which country was most powerful politically, 67% of respondents selected the United States, compared to Japan at 7% and China at 4% (Table 5). When a subsequent question was asked about which country was most powerful economically, 42% of respondents selected the United States, followed by Japan at 39% and China at 3% (Table 6). American perceptions of Japan’s relative economic power peaked near this 1994 survey, whereas perceptions of China’s economic power peaked in the 2000s.¹

Table 5

Most powerful politically

Princeton Survey Research Associates: “Which of the following nations or regions is the most powerful politically in the world today...East Asia, Western Europe, United States, Japan, China, Russia?”

	1994
Response	%
East Asia	3
Western Europe	4
United States	67
Japan	7
China	4
Russia	7
Other (vol.)	-
Don't know/Refused	8
N	1494

Table 6

Most powerful economically

Princeton Survey Research Associates: “Which of the following nations or regions is the most powerful economically in the world today...East Asia, Western Europe, United States, Japan, China, Russia?”

	1994
Responses	%
East Asia	4
Western Europe	4
United States	42
Japan	39
China	3
Russia	1
Other (vol.)	-
Don't know/Refused	7
N	1494

Japan

In addition to the selection of short-term trends described, many questions were asked across multiple decades, and are useful for tracking long-term trends. These long-term trends focus primarily on U.S. attitudes toward China and Japan, their people, government, and policies. Long-term sentiment toward Japan shows a general upward trend, beginning with strongly unfavorable sentiments during World War II. Poll items during the war did not ask about favorability toward Japan, but rather asked respondents to decide whether the Japanese government or the Japanese people were the primary enemy of the United States. In the later years of the war—1944 and 1945—up to 46% of respondents identified either the “people” or “both government and people” as the “chief enemy” of the United States (Table 7). Polling data shows that sentiment toward Japan improves after the war, and then begins to hold fairly steady. One item, included in 34 Gallup polls between 1960 and 1994, asks whether or not Japan is a dependable ally of the United States. The first time the question is asked in 1960, 33% of respondents called Japan dependable, and 55% called Japan not dependable. By 1970, 44% of respondents called Japan dependable, and 36% called Japan not dependable. Between 1970 and 1994, all but one data point shows ‘dependable’ outnumbering ‘not dependable’ (Table 8) (Figure 1).

Table 7

Enemy is government or the people

Potomac Associates and Opinion Dynamics: “In the war with Japan, do you feel that our chief enemy is the Japanese government, or the Japanese people as a whole?”

	January 1944	March 1944	June 1944	December 1944	March 1945
Response	%	%	%	%	%
Government	48	51	53	51	49
People	19	12	11	13	11
Both (vol.)	29	33	33	31	35
Other (vol.)	-	45	44	55	46
Don't know/No opinion	4	4	3	5	5
N	1228	1266	1430	1245	1200

Table 8

Is Japan a dependable ally?

Gallup: "Do you think Japan is or is not a dependable ally (friend) of the United States?"

	1960	1961	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Is dependable	31	41	46	46	39	44	39	42	45
Is not dependable	55	38	31	33	36	33	36	35	32
Don't know	14	21	23	21	25	23	25	23	23
N	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500

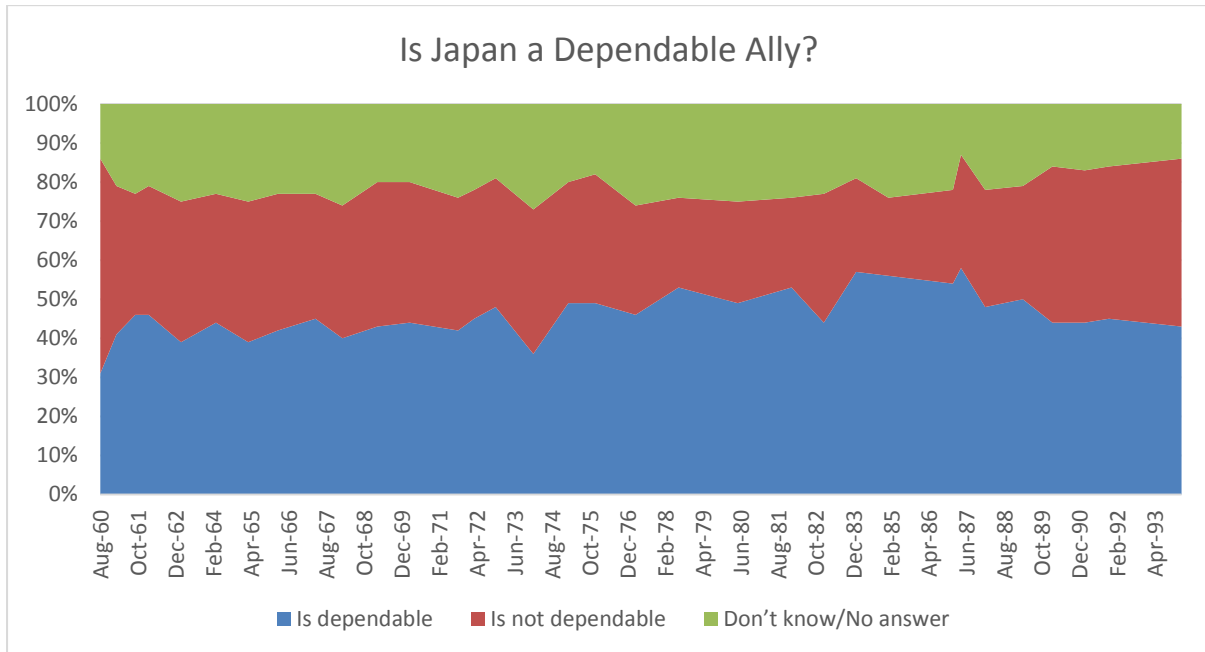
	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1975
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Is dependable	40	43	44	42	45	48	36	49	49
Is not dependable	34	37	36	34	33	33	37	31	33
Don't know	26	20	20	24	22	19	27	20	18
N	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500

	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Is dependable	46	53	49	53	44	57	56	55
Is not dependable	28	23	26	23	33	24	20	22
Don't know	26	24	25	24	23	19	24	23
N	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500	1500

	1987	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1991	1994
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Is dependable	54	58	48	50	44	44	45	43
Is not dependable	24	29	30	29	40	39	39	43
Don't know	22	14	22	21	16	17	16	14
N	1500	615	1500	1611	1502	1470	1005	1508

Figure 1

American Perception of Japan as a Dependable Ally



Gallup: "In your opinion, do you think Japan is or is not a dependable ally or friend of the United States?"

Total N: 49,711

In data from another poll item, asked 39 times from 1978 to 2011, sentiment appears fairly stable with only short-term disruptions. For the question, "Is your overall opinion of Japan very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?," the majority of respondents answered either "mostly favorable" or "very favorable." Overall opinion was most favorable to Japan in 1979, with 32% of Americans responding that their overall opinion of Japan was "very favorable" followed by 50% reporting it was "mostly favorable". The lowest favorable sentiment was 4% in 1995. This low point is likely attributable to trade disputes including a dispute over auto import tariffs. Favorability recovered quickly: by 1999, 75% of respondents indicated either "mostly favorable" or "very favorable" when asked about Japan (Table 9).

Table 9

Overall opinion of Japan

“Is your overall opinion of Japan very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?”

	1978	1979	1987	1988	1989	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very favorable	23	32	15	21	12	10	3	11	9	7	8
Mostly favorable	50	50	58	51	57	48	60	51	38	41	62
Mostly unfavorable	13	8	15	15	16	23	28	21	28	30	19
Very unfavorable	4	4	7	6	7	10	2	9	22	16	8
Don't know	11	7	5	7	8	9	7	8	3	6	4
N	1546	1065	1005	1300	1000	1250	1000	1005	1002	1008	1007

	1995	1996	1998	1999	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very favorable	4	12	9	15	14	13	17	17	18	19
Mostly favorable	42	53	53	54	61	57	56	62	59	56
Mostly unfavorable	34	18	15	16	15	17	14	12	10	14
Very unfavorable	11	7	8	5	5	5	7	4	5	6
Don't know	10	10	14	10	5	8	6	5	8	5
N	931	979	1189	1054	1025	1028	1003	1011	1001	1002

	2005	2006	2006	2007	2008	2008	2009	2009	2010	2011
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very favorable	22	20	22	24	24	25	19	24	19	22
Mostly favorable	59	61	44	58	58	45	62	57	58	58
Mostly unfavorable	9	9	9	10	10	8	9	11	12	11
Very unfavorable	5	4	5	3	3	3	4	6	4	4
Don't know	5	5	21	5	5	18	6	1	7	5
N	1008	1002	1001	1007	1007	1000	1022	1023	1025	1015

Data from other poll items confirm the early 1990s as an outlier when compared to fairly stable long-term sentiment. For the above-mentioned poll item tracking whether or not Japan is a dependable ally, the answer “is not dependable” received the highest response rate from 1990 to 1994. In response to another item about allies, the number of Americans reporting Japan as a close ally drops during the early 1990s, but picks up again to record highs in the 2000s.

Perception of Japan as a legitimate economic competitor follows roughly the same long-term trends as overall favorability, with a corresponding decline in the 1990s. According to an NBC poll that asked “When it comes to economic power, which country is in a stronger position – the U.S. (United States) or Japan?,” in 1990 73% of respondents selected Japan and 20% selected the United States. However, by 1998, this had almost reversed: 66% of respondents selected the United States, 24% selected Japan (Table 10). Similarly, Americans decreasingly viewed Japan’s economic competition as a critical threat: The percentage of Americans with this view dropped from 60% in 1990 to 29% in 2002 (Table 11). The percent who responded that Japan practices unfair trade with the United States also drastically decreased during these years, from 71% in 1990 to 41% in 2002 (Table 12).

Table 10

Economic power

NBC: “When it comes to economic power, which country is in a stronger position--the U.S. (United States) or Japan?”

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1998
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%
United States	20	26	23	47	54	66
Japan	73	66	72	44	37	24
About equal (Vol.)	3	3	2	3	2	4
Not sure	4	5	3	6	7	6
N	1510	1505	1502	1002	1503	1005

Table 11

Threat of economic competition from Japan

Gallup & Harris: “(I am going to read you a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please tell me if you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all.)
 ...Economic competition from Japan”

	1990	1995	1998	2002
Response	%	%	%	%
Critical	60	62	45	29
Important but not critical	32	31	45	53
Not important	5	4	6	16
Don't know^b	3	3	4	2
N	1662	1492	1507	3262

Table 12

Fair or unfair trade with US

Gallup & ABC & Harris: “In general, do you think that Japan practices fair trade or unfair trade with the United States?”

	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	2002
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Fair trade	17	31	22	16	17	24	31	47
Unfair trade	71	61	70	78	71	68	55	41
Don't know/No opinion	12	8	8	5	12	8	14	12
N	1662	1174	1011	1531	1492	505	1507	3262

China

Whereas most polling items about Japan asked about trade and the economy, items on China reflect an interest in Americans’ perception of China as a world power, not only a major economy. From 2001 to 2010, the proportion of American respondents reporting that China’s emergence as a world power is a major threat to the United States has stayed very close to 50% plus or minus a few percentage points. The proportion reporting that it is a “minor threat” has also been stable at around 30%, with about 10% reporting it is “not a threat” (Table 13). In terms of military strength, in 1986, only 26%

of Americans polled said they think China is a military threat. By 2008, the number climbed to over 50% (Table 14).

Table 13

Emergence of China as a major threat

Princeton Survey Research Associates: "I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for the US (United States). Do you think that... China's emergence as a world power is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to the well-being of the United States?"

	2001	2005	2006	2008	2008	2009	2009	2009	2010
Response	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Major threat	51	52	47	50	48	46	52	53	53
Minor threat	30	31	34	31	35	36	31	30	24
Not a threat	10	10	12	10	11	13	11	10	16
Don't know	9	7	7	9	6	5	6	7	7
N	1587	2006	1502	1505	2982	1503	1502	2000	1008

Table 14

Is China a military threat?

AP: "Do you think China is a military threat to the United States, or not?"

	1986	2005	2008	2009
Response	%	%	%	%
Yes, a military threat	26	50	51	51
No	64	48	49	47
Don't know	10	2	-	2
N	1512	1003	1041	1014

Other polling items show an increasing concern with China's development as a world power. A Gallup poll asked whether respondents saw the development of China as a world power as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all. In 1990, 40% said the development was a critical threat. In 2002, this number was 56% (Table 15). Another poll asked which of the following statements best describes China's role in the world today: currently an economic and military superpower, not a superpower but expect it to become one someday, or will never become a superpower. In 1997, 22% responded that China was currently a superpower, 49% said not currently but expect to become one, and 22% said it will never be a superpower. By 2010, the percent responding China was currently a

superpower had risen to 46% and only 8% believed it will never be a superpower (Table 16). When asked whether monitoring the emergence of China as a world power should have top priority in the U.S. government, the percentage responding that it should has risen by about 10 percentage points since the early 1990s to over 40%. An additional nearly 50% say it is a priority but not a top priority (Table 17).

Table 15

Is China a critical threat in the next ten years?

Gallup: “(I am going to read you a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please tell me if you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all.)... The development of China as a world power”

	1990	1995	1998	2002
Responses	%	%	%	%
Critical	40	57	57	56
Important but not critical	43	32	32	34
Not important	9	5	6	8
Don't know	8	6	5	2
N	1662	1492	1507	3262

Table 16

China's role in the world

Gallup: “Which of the following statements do you think best describes China's role in the world today? China is currently an economic and military superpower, China is not a superpower but you expect it to become one someday, or China will never become a superpower?”

	1997	2010
Response	%	%
Currently superpower	22	46
Not currently but expect to become one	49	43
Will never be superpower	22	8
Other (vol.)	-	1
Don't know/Refused	7	1
N	631	1014

Table 17

Monitoring China's emergence

NBC: "As I read another list of specific foreign policy problems, tell me whether each one should have top priority in the U.S. (United States) government, a priority but not top priority, or no priority:... Monitoring the emergence of China as a world power?"

	1993	1999	2003	2005
Response	%	%	%	%
Top priority	33	42	39	42
A priority	45	38	49	46
No priority	20	14	10	9
Don't know	3	6	2	3
N	2000	1786	1218	1503

Polling items that tracked overall sentiment toward China followed basically the same trends as items that asked about China's development as a world power. In response to a CBS question that asked whether respondents' feelings toward China were generally favorable, unfavorable, or neutral, for example, favorability has dropped significantly in the last 25 years. In 1989, 32% responded favorable and 7% unfavorable. By 2001 the results had nearly reversed, with only 13% favorable and 34% unfavorable (Table 18).²

Table 18

General feelings toward China

CBS: "Are your feelings toward China generally favorable, generally unfavorable, or neutral?"

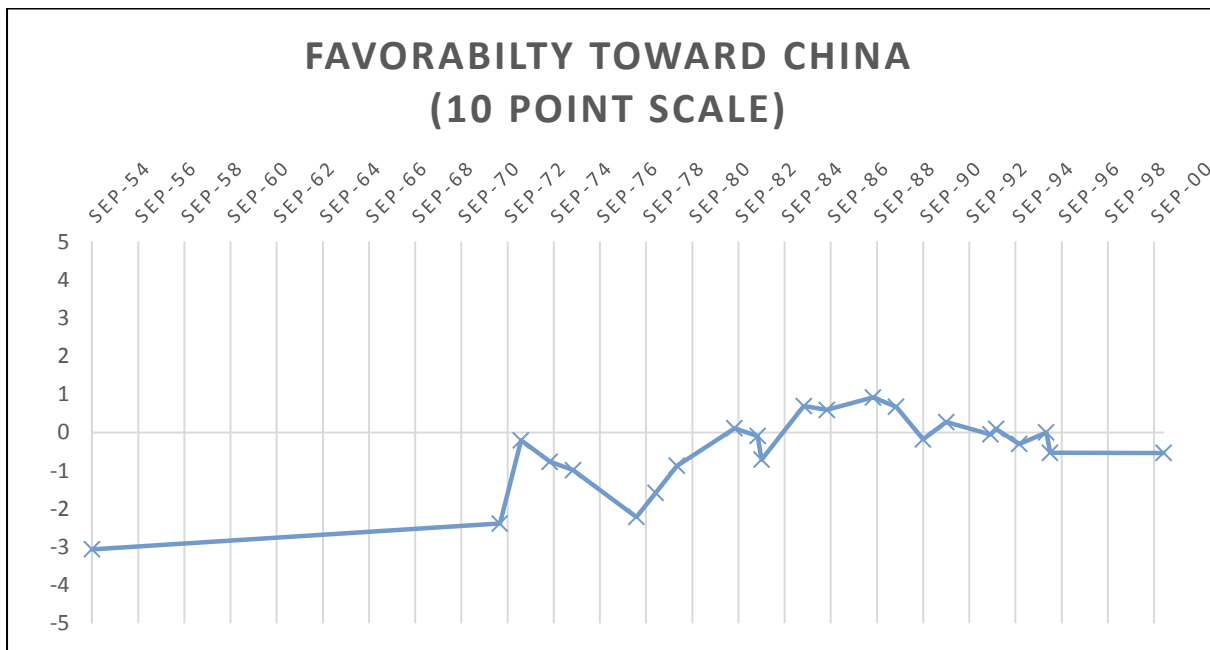
	1989	1998	1998	1999	2001
Response	%	%	%	%	%
Favorable	32	13	12	18	13
Unfavorable	7	26	23	24	34
Neutral	57	58	61	53	48
Don't know	4	3	4	5	5
N	1073	1080	1126	578	660

Another long term focal point of polling items about China has been human rights. By comparing the results of overall favorability polls with the historical context of China's high profile human rights violations, it appears that American favorability

toward China is more heavily influenced by economic and national security considerations than concerns for human rights and democracy. Americans' favorability toward China was more than twice as high in the years surrounding the controversies over political freedom and rights at Tiananmen Square in 1989 than in the past decade. Beginning after Mao's death in the 1970s, changes in favorability track much more closely with China's economic rise than with the salience of humanitarian concerns (Figure 2). Given the number of variables that could influence overall favorability, it is difficult to determine without more research whether human rights issues are improving and how that is related to perceptions of China.

Figure 2

American Favorability toward China (Likert scale -5 to 5)



Gallup: "Here's an interesting experiment. You notice that the 10 boxes on this card go from the highest position of plus 5--or something you like very much--all the way down to the lowest position of minus 5--or something you dislike very much. Will you put your finger on any one of the 10 boxes which best tells how you feel about... China?"

Total N: 34,334

Conclusion

The polling data on American attitudes toward China and Japan contains a wealth of information, from which we have highlighted only a few interesting findings. The content of the poll items are fascinating markers of moments in history as well as indicators of the current climate. The short- and long-term trends also provide tremendous insight on how public opinion changes and how foreign policy choices will be perceived domestically. While difficult to predict, it is also interesting to speculate on how public opinion in the U.S. toward Japan and China will change in the future: whether perceptions toward China will begin to look more like those toward Japan, and if public opinion will ultimately depend on their economic success.

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¹ American's perceptions about relative economic strength are strikingly dissimilar to economic realities. At the end of 2013, after a decade of rapid economic growth in China and a major financial crash in the United States, the US economy was still 1.82 times the size of China's and 3.42 times the size of Japan's. The difference in GDP per capita is even larger. In 2013, American GDP per Capita was 1.43 times higher than Japanese GDP per Capita, and 5.39 times higher than Chinese GDP per Capita, and

² These results are interesting in geo-political context because the decline in favorability occurs during the tenure of Jiang Zemin as General Secretary and President. Jiang is widely credited with increasing China's stature in the international community by pursuing a conciliatory foreign policy toward the United States and prioritizing international trade and economic integration.

Biographical Notes

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