



## REPORT

# THE YIN AND YANG OF RUSSIA'S IMAGE IN CHINA NETIZEN DISCOURSE AND REAL-LIFE IMPLICATIONS

| URMAS HÖBEPAPPEL |

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Cover page photo: Russian soldiers of the Presidential regiment performs during the Spasskaya Tower International Military Music Festival in Red Square in front of the St. Basil Cathedral in Moscow, Russia, on 23 August 2024. AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko/Scanpix

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <b>CCDCOE</b> | Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO) |
| <b>CCGPS</b>  | Chinese Citizens’ Global Perception Survey            |
| <b>CCP</b>    | Chinese Communist Party                               |
| <b>PRC</b>    | People’s Republic of China                            |

<sup>1</sup> Urmass Hõbepappel, “[Russia in the Eyes of the Chinese Social Media Users](#),” *Choice*, 21 March 2024. Read more about how Chinese netizens perceive the Sino-Russian border in: Urmass Hõbepappel, *Chinese netizens’ perceptions of the Sino-Russian border* (Tartu University Asia Centre, 2025).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines how Chinese online narratives frame Russia and its war in Ukraine, showing how these narratives sustain, complicate, or undermine the partnership of the two countries. The analysis highlights three broad categories of narratives: positive, pragmatic, and negative. These narratives interact in contradictory ways, reflecting both popular opinion and the strategic calculations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

- **Positive narratives** depict Russia as a fellow victim of western aggression, an inevitable victor, and a natural great power. These draw on emotional resonance with Russia and reinforce Chinese affinity and solidarity with Moscow, presenting Sino-Russian ties as a shared front against western hegemony.
- **Pragmatic narratives** are less emotionally invested in Russia's success, instead stressing China's strategic interests. They highlight the benefits of maintaining a great-power balance, extracting lessons from Russia's war, or using the conflict as an opportunity for China to focus on its own development. Most of these views are pro-Russian in their wording but not in spirit, instrumentalising Moscow's role while avoiding unconditional support.
- **Negative narratives** recall Russia's colonial legacy, painting it as greedy, arrogant, untrustworthy, or militarily weak. Historical grievances over the "lost territories" of the Far East continue to fuel resentment, with some netizens advocating that China should one day reclaim them. Such narratives undermine emotional resonance and occasionally liken Russia to Japan, placing it in the same category as China's other historical rivals.

The coexistence of these narratives generates contradictory public opinions. Sympathy for Russia as a fellow victim coexists with anger at its colonial past, admiration for its resilience sits alongside mockery of its military failures, and strategic pragmatism tempers both support and hostility. This ambivalence reflects not only the diversity of Chinese society but also the CCP's deliberate management of the "Russia question." The CCP appears to tolerate some degree of critical sentiment on Russia, consistent with the united front work logic: Antagonism with the United States takes priority, while disputes with Russia are deferred until later. Yet this balancing act is fragile. Economic pressures and intensifying nationalism could bring anti-Russian narratives to the forefront earlier than intended, especially if public demand for recovering "lost territories" grows louder, although this is unlikely in the near term. Moreover, Chinese nationalism cannot be explained solely as a top-down project; it influences elites as well as the masses, and past episodes show that leaders sometimes act from nationalist anger rather than rational calculation.

The analysis concludes that Sino-Russian emotional resonance is neither secure nor stable, but an emotional battleground requiring constant refurbishment. The CCP must carefully manage public opinion to prevent nationalism from undermining its strategic partnership with Moscow, while avoiding the impression of betraying long-standing historical grievances. Much, however, lies beyond Beijing's control. For external actors, this instability offers potential leverage. By amplifying Chinese grievances over Russia's colonial past and highlighting contradictions in public opinion, western powers could weaken the "no-limits" partnership between Beijing and Moscow.



**Area China lost in the 'unequal treaties' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

Source: The Author, based on Bobo Lo, Andy Rothman, "China and Russia: Common Interests, Contrasting Perceptions," In *Asia Pacific Strategy, Asian Geopolitics Special Report* (CLSA Asia-Pacific Markets, 2006), 1-31

## INTRODUCTION

The dream of Russia and China dominating the world together dates back to at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> This is also how the two countries are often portrayed and perceived, working together to weaken the liberal international order by challenging its principles and institutions. Through joint military exercises, strategic coordination, and shared narratives, Moscow and Beijing have tried to advance an authoritarian-centred vision that erodes western influence. For all appearances, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have cultivated a close personal affiliation.

Yet this “no-limits” partnership, which was reaffirmed once again on the third anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine early last year, is challenged by aversive historical experiences.<sup>3</sup> For the Chinese, Russia is not only a partner in bringing down US “hegemony,” but also a historical adversary. The collective memory of colonialism serves as one of the most important legitimating factors for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As

<sup>2</sup> Philip Snow, *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord* (Yale University Press, 2023), 108.

<sup>3</sup> Antoni Slodkowski, Laurie Chen, “China’s Xi affirms ‘no limits’ partnership with Putin in call on Ukraine war anniversary,” *Reuters*, 24 February 2025.

one of the major colonial powers of the past two centuries, Russia occupies a central role in this narrative. This fact creates a dilemma for the CCP: It cannot forsake the official history narrative where Russia figures as an aggressor that violated Qing China’s territorial integrity and launched Chinese society into a century-long economic, social, and political decline, nor can it undermine its own geopolitical ambitions in which Russia serves as a primary partner in bringing down western hegemony and paving the way for China to achieve national glory. Whereas the country’s leaders may, for the time being, overlook Russia’s colonial trespasses in the name of a greater political goal, the increasingly nationalistic public often cannot. In the public imagination, Russia is both a villain and a hero.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this report is to (1) present a systematised overview of opinions and narratives about Russia among Chinese netizens and (2) discern which emotions these narratives engender and whether they build mutual emotional resonance or confrontation.<sup>5</sup> The picture that emerges is less black and white than China’s authoritarian setting (see Annex A) would suggest, allowing multiple and often contradictory narratives to exist side-by-side. Opinions range from uncompromising praise of Russia and its war in Ukraine (discussed in Chapter 1) to bitter criticism of Russia’s current policies and its colonial legacy (discussed in Chapter 3). In between these poles, we find a range of pragmatic voices (discussed in Chapter 2) that applaud Moscow’s actions but only insofar as they serve China’s own needs. Whatever their take on the matter, netizens usually express clear-cut and often strong opinions about Russia, rather than being hesitant, unaware, or simply confused. These polarised opinions show that Russia is at the centre of a lively public debate, implying, as I will come to argue, that Beijing’s official stance is also more nuanced and less Russia-oriented than often assumed.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> This is an updated and expanded continuation of an earlier study: Urmas Hõbepappel, “Russia in the Eyes of the Chinese Social Media Users,” *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*, March 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Reza Hasmath, “China’s Enduring Trust in Russia: The Public Sentiment Behind an Unlikely Partnership,” *The Diplomat*, 23 July, 2025.

The study utilises content from *Jinri Toutiao* (今日头条), a news and social media platform founded in 2012 and owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, which has links to the CCP.<sup>7</sup> The study builds on an inductive analysis of articles as well as comments published on the platform between June 2021 and August 2025. The content was analysed to the point of saturation, which does not guarantee exhaustive results, but assures a relatively complete picture of Russia's image among Chinese netizens. To make reading easier, I make a distinction between (1) authors, referring to those who wrote articles or made videos, and (2) commentators, referring to those who comment on the articles and videos (See Annex A for details).

## 1. OPINIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND HISTORY BEHIND THEM

Several studies have examined the image of Russia and Russians among the Chinese. A 2016 study showed that 73% of Chinese people saw Russia and Russians in a positive or very positive light.<sup>8</sup> Another survey, published in 2022, found that, six years on, this number had remained by and large stable: 79.8% of Chinese people had a positive perception of Russia, while only 12% reported a negative opinion.<sup>9</sup> Also, Russia's foreign policy was assessed positively by 73% of the respondents, indicating, the authors argue, "that when the Chinese look around, they see a relatively hostile international environment in which Russia is the sole great power standing with China and opposing the US." These results were reconfirmed by the Chinese Citizens' Global Perception Survey (CCGPS), conducted in 2023–25, which shows that Russia is by far China's most trusted global partner.<sup>10</sup> Although its status as the "most trusted" has declined somewhat in the past year (from 28% to 20%), Russia is still five times more trusted than the next in line, the EU and Germany (both at 4%). Russia is also regarded as the most important country for China's long-term future, outperforming all others by a large margin.

Yet Russia's image is not completely without blemish. Despite its most trusted status, the CCGPS indicates that Russia's influence in the world is not deemed significant, and it is a relatively unattractive destination for work, study, or visit. Overall knowledge about the country and its economic and social conditions is sparse, more or less on par with that of

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Lee et al. "[TikTok, ByteDance, And Their Ties to the Chinese Communist Party](#)," *Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media*, 14 March 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Jolanda Van der Noll, Henk Dekker, "[A comparative analysis of Chinese urban citizens' attitudes towards the EU, the United States, Russia and Japan](#)," *International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2016): 456–472.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, Klára Dubravčíková, Kristína Kironská et al., "Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war: Evidence from a March 2022 public opinion survey," *Palacky University Olomouc, CEIAS* (March 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Hasmath Reza, "[Chinese Citizens' Global Perception Survey \(CCGPS\)](#)" (University of Alberta, 2025).

Japan and the US.<sup>11</sup> Although the 2022 study quoted above provides a more positive picture of Russia as a travel and study destination, and ranks it as the most appealing foreign country of all, the stereotypes attached to the “Big Goose” (大鹅, an informal nickname for Russia often used in social media) over the centuries have been difficult to shift.<sup>12</sup> A 2020 survey of Chinese students showed that for most of the respondents, “Russia is a country where it is always very cold, where people are harsh and militant and do not like to smile.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Chinese citizens working north of the border have been shown to associate Russians with drunkenness, greed, egoism, and parasitism, as well as kindness and honesty.<sup>14</sup> So, even though statistical surveys suggest that Russia has indeed remained highly regarded over the past decade by the Chinese public, at least when it comes to international affairs and cooperation, knowledge about the country is limited and influenced by clichés and prejudice. The prevalence of stereotypes suggests, as Richard Q. Turcsányi and colleagues argue, that “this friendliness does not have very deep social roots and is driven by a pragmatic recognition of the exigencies of state-to-state relations, along with the persona of the current Russian leader.”<sup>15</sup>

Chinese perceptions of Russia are influenced by multiple factors. The greatest impact has probably been made by Moscow’s painstaking campaigns to convey Russia’s viewpoints, values, and interests to the Chinese public. This effort has been made easier by cooperation with Chinese partners and a general agreement with Beijing to “tell each other’s stories well.”

<sup>11</sup> A.A. Sorokina, M.S. Maximenkova, “Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth,” *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2020): 157–158; Reza, *Chinese Citizens’ Global Perception Survey*.

<sup>12</sup> Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war,” 27.

<sup>13</sup> Sorokina et al., “Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth.”

<sup>14</sup> K. Vasileva, A. Ostrovskij, T. Alagueva, “The Image of Russians in the Eyes of the Chinese and the Image of the Chinese in the Eyes of Russians on Contiguous Territory,” *Far Eastern Affairs*, 2007, Vol. 35, No 4, 104–114, cited in Sorokina et al., “Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth,” 148.

<sup>15</sup> Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war,” 12.

State-affiliated media from both sides (e.g., *People’s Daily*, *Xinhua*, *RT*, *Sputnik*) have held regular meetings since 2015 and agreed in 2018 to coordinate messaging by publishing materials approved by the other side’s government.<sup>16</sup> This effort aims to influence perceptions and guide narratives both within the two countries and internationally, and has no doubt contributed to the Chinese public’s positive view of Russia. But Russia’s image is also influenced by factors outside Moscow’s purview, such as social media discussions, vernacular memories, Chinese school curricula, classical literature, and even western news outlets. For instance, China’s schools still prescribe mandatory readings of Russian classics, including Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered*, Leo Tolstoy’s

*Russia’s image abroad is not entirely under Moscow’s control, not even in China*

*War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and Alexander Pushkin’s poetry.<sup>17</sup> The narratives in these books influence how Chinese people perceive their northern neighbour, much like personal acquaintances with Russians and visits to Russia.<sup>18</sup> In short, Russia’s image abroad is not entirely under Moscow’s control, not even in China.

*By mirroring each other’s historical grievances, Beijing and Moscow have managed to create emotional resonance with their respective audiences*

Part of the Sino-Russian narrative alignment has to do with history. By mirroring each other’s historical grievances (primarily against the United States and the ‘collective west’), Beijing and Moscow have managed to create emotional resonance with their respective

<sup>16</sup> Mayya Solonina and Katja Drinhausen, “[Chinese and Russian media partner to ‘tell each other’s stories well’](#),” *MERICs*, 22 December 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Ekaterina V. Senina, Kseniia A. Poliakova, “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” *The Russian Journal of Cultural Studies and Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2025), 15; Sorokina et al., “Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth,” 154.

<sup>18</sup> Senina et al., “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” 16.

audiences.<sup>19</sup> This emotional resonance serves as an affective bedrock for increased geopolitical alignment between the two countries (see Annex B).

Using history to tie Beijing's and Moscow's interests closer together is like walking a tightrope, however, because Russia's colonial legacy in China is packed with judicial infringements, manipulation, mass deportations, and straight-up murder. And the Chinese know it. Chinese authorities have had to make hard choices to tell their colonial history without making Russia look too guilty. For instance, the Aihui History Museum in Heihe covers Sino-Russian relations from the Treaty of Nerchinsk onwards, but fails to mention the Blagoveshchensk massacre of 1900, a mass killing of Chinese civilians by Russian forces just across the river from Heihe. The self-study materials for the period covering Russia's colonial endeavours in China's northeast do not emphasise events that might generate negative feelings towards the former invader. These instances have been taken as proof that the authorities are trying to downplay China's past suffering at the hands of Russia.<sup>20</sup> The CCP leads an authoritarian regime where manipulating historical facts (史实) is, of course, paramount to the legitimacy of the governing elite and its specific policies.<sup>21</sup> Try as it may, however, the CCP seems to be unable to erase Russia's colonial aggression from public memory. Part of the reason is in the CCP's own official narrative of history. Another part, as I will argue, may be that Beijing may not want to create a collective amnesia on this issue because this would counter its other objectives.

While the emotional resonance between Russia and China is real – as amply demonstrated by the survey results discussed above – it may not be too deep. It is constantly challenged by Chinese state-led nationalism and its underlying history narrative, creating

a different picture of Russia and, more importantly, a different set of emotions. For decades, the CCP has been justifying its hold on power by forging a patriotic history narrative: a linear, progressive, and deterministic account of Chinese history premised on the chosen trauma of colonial aggression and culminating with the “inevitable” ascendance of the CCP. Ten years after its countrywide inception in 1994, the official history narrative – known to the Chinese as the “century of humiliation” (百年国耻) – had been well integrated into the public imagination, engendering strong nationalist sentiments.<sup>22</sup> After the 2008 financial crisis and Xi's ascendance to power in 2012, China's nationalist rhetoric has only become more inflammatory.<sup>23</sup> Political slogans like “complete reunification of the motherland” (祖国完全统一) and “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (民族复兴) are the defining hallmarks of the Xi administration. Russia is considered to be one of the greatest villains in China's history because of its colonial past and its territorial hold on the Far East. According to the *General History of Modern China*, an

*Russia is considered to be one of the greatest villains in China's history because of its colonial past and its territorial hold on the Far East*

authoritative textbook on Chinese history published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “Among the powers that invaded China [...], Tsarist Russia was actually the most greedy and the one that acquired the most spoils.”<sup>24</sup> As long as this notion prevails, the no-limits partnership between Moscow and Beijing will remain tenuous, because China's integrity and dignity cannot be restored without repatriating the lands of the North East.

<sup>19</sup> See Annex A for more on the concept of emotional resonance.

<sup>20</sup> Dominik Mierzejewski, “Reading years of Humiliation. Sino-Russian border and China's national identity,” *Sensus Historiae*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2012), 65–66.

<sup>21</sup> Geremie R. Barmé, “History for the Masses,” in Jonathan Unger, *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> James Reilly, “China's History Activism and Sino-Japanese Relations,” *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2006), 189–216; Liu Shih-Ding, “China's popular nationalism on the internet. Report on the 2005 anti-Japanese struggle,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2006), 144–155.

<sup>23</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “From affirmative to assertive patriots: Nationalism in Xi Jinping's China,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2021).

<sup>24</sup> Zhang, Haipeng 张海鹏, *中国近代通史 第二卷: 近代中国的开端 (1840–1865)* [General History of Modern China, Vol. 2: The Beginning of Modern China (1840–1865)] (Phoenix Library, Historical Research Series, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2009), 593.

**The contradiction with the Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment and the accompanying emotional resonance** is evident. So how do the Chinese square that circle?

William Callahan argues persuasively that we can use the logic of the “united front work” (统一战线工作) to understand Beijing’s current thinking about Russia. In a nutshell, the united front logic differentiates between “antagonistic contradictions” and “non-antagonistic contradictions”. At present, the historical grievances toward Russia are understood as non-antagonistic and can be set aside as long as “antagonistic contradictions” are overcome. This may put Russia at ease, for the time being at least, since it will take a long time to overcome the US time (if it happens at all).

But the united front work rationale is sensitive to other factors and should not be read as all-explanatory. First, to state the obvious, the level-headed logic of united front work has limited appeal among the general public. Although there are some who seem to have taken the calculation on board, many more are known to take their cues directly from the nationalist history narratives and act “emotionally” rather than “rationally.”<sup>25</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss notes in her study of public protests in China that protesters are often “motivated by sincere grievances as well as anger that has been stoked by patriotic propaganda and inflammatory media coverage.”<sup>26</sup> Also, party officials are moved by affect. Cairns and Carlson show that the residents of Zhongnanhai (the area that’s home to government offices in Beijing) have internalised the official nationalistic narrative and, therefore, make decisions based not on infallible rational logic but on “a cauldron of xenophobia.”<sup>27</sup> Callahan’s own argument also entails the assertion that the united front work logic does not make Beijing’s foreign relations a matter of a realist

security dilemma where rational choice decisions dominate. In sum, emotions do not necessarily take a back seat to rational logic. Even if it makes geopolitical sense for Beijing to align with Moscow against the US, the psychological undercurrents of the official history narrative pull the other way and make the CCP’s leaders, as well as the public, prone to act in accordance with a strong sense of nationalism rather than following strictly level-headed and rational calculations of geopolitics. (It goes without saying that geopolitical considerations also have their own affective basis.)

This makes it difficult for the Chinese authorities and the general public to tolerate any historical actor that has infringed upon China’s territorial integrity and self-esteem, including Russia, putting the emotional resonance between the two countries under pressure. “We should remember,” Callahan concludes, “that historiographies of national humiliation and lost territories speak to clashes of civilisations between competing traditions: i.e., clashes not just between China and the west, but also between China and Russia.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, if nationalistic sentiments are allowed to go unchecked, if stereotypical and critical opinions about Russia are provided more oxygen, a Sino-Russian collision may one day be unavoidable – an eventuality that has not gone unnoticed in Russia.<sup>29</sup> We are not there yet, and many preconditions must be met for this to come to pass. The united front work rationale should certainly be given its due in determining which way Beijing’s foreign relations develop. That said, emotions attached to Chinese nationalist discourse cannot be sidelined as insignificant in affecting the Sino-Russian relationship. Public opinion has some bearing on the policymakers of Zhongnanhai, despite their authoritarian credentials.

<sup>25</sup> Jiyoung Ko, *Popular Nationalism and War* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 51.

<sup>26</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 36.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Cairns, Allen Carlson, “Real-world Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 225 (2016), 40.

<sup>28</sup> William A. Callahan, “Chinese global orders: socialism, tradition, and nation in China–Russia relations,” *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (2023), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Zang Dongsheng, “Imperial collision: Future of China’s relations with Russia,” *Washington International Law Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2024), 93–95.

When it comes to Sino-Russian relations, Russia's reflection in China's official channels is only half of the picture. The other half of the picture comprises the opinions of the Chinese people, including the netizens. The discussions in China's commentaries reveal a lively debate on what to think of Russia, its aggression toward Ukraine, and its meddling in world affairs more broadly. This debate includes voices that are highly critical of Russia, with statements such as "According to history, Russians are the least reliable people";<sup>30</sup> "If Russia is defeated, we will seize the occasion to take back the land occupied by it in Siberia";<sup>31</sup> and "If Russia can't even win against Ukraine, then it's not called Russia."<sup>32</sup> These critical voices are not censored in the otherwise strictly controlled Chinese internet space – which tells us that Callahan may be right – these narratives and emotions critical of Russia may one day prove useful to the CCP (for more, see the page above). We cannot tell when that day will come. Until then, it behoves us to understand every narrative about Russia that exists in China, even if representatively insignificant, because every opinion speaks of what the Chinese truly feel about their northern neighbour.

## 2. POSITIVE DEPICTIONS OF RUSSIA

There is ample statistical evidence that Russia is in the good books of a majority of the Chinese public. As this chapter demonstrates, affinity toward Russia comes in different shades: Some opinions are as simplistic as "Support Russia, support Putin the Great, Russia will win," while others are more elaborate, revealing a deeper recognition of Russia's and China's geopolitical imperatives.<sup>33</sup> All positive narratives about Russia, the regime in Moscow, and its leader serve to forge emotional resonance. Support for Ukraine among Chinese netizens is uncommon, but the belief in Russia's victory is strong. "Support Russia!"; "Russia must win"; and "Russia cannot fail" are common calls voiced on the Chinese internet. But it will also become evident, as other analysts have pointed out, that genuine knowledge about Russia is sparse – positive feelings for Russia originate less from genuine affinity towards the country (hallmarks of soft power) and more from fear for the alternative, i.e., US aggression. In other words, Russia's positive image is often a mirror image of anxiety about the US and the collective west.

*Positive feelings for Russia originate less from genuine affinity towards the country and more from fear for the alternative*

The following chapter discerns two large narrative groups. First, I will discuss Russia as analogous to China (e.g., "Russia as an Asian power"), and then I will examine the narratives that play up Russia's strengths, including its essential characteristics such as "military spirit" and being a "fighting nation."

### 2.1. THE ANALOGY: RUSSIA AND CHINA ARE ALIKE

Taking a theoretical approach to emotional resonance, Lu and Zhang discuss three types of narrative persuasion, all of which can be

<sup>30</sup> 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后](#) (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国如果失败了，未来会有多凄惨呢？](#) [If Russia fails, how miserable will the future be?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 12 February 2023 – accessed 6 August 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Comment to [张元伟](#) (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>33</sup> Comment to [张元伟](#) (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [Zhang Yuanwei. If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

recognised in the analysis below.<sup>34</sup> One of them is the analogy – building emotional resonance by suggesting that two cases are similar. There is reason to believe that people and groups who are perceived as being more like us engender more empathy. We tend to feel their physical pain and psychological distress more intensely than that of dissimilar individuals and groups.<sup>35</sup> From the perspective of two different regimes that wish to cooperate, it makes sense to foster similarity narratives. This narrative type can be recognised in the insistent depiction of Russia as a fellow victim of western aggression, as an Asian power, and as a country with similar traits to China (e.g., large land mass, great leader).

### 2.1.1. A FELLOW VICTIM OF WESTERN AGGRESSION

Perhaps the most notable narrative alignment with China's own image is that Russia is also believed to suffer under western aggression. This narrative uses both historical and contemporary evidence, but the latter is more prominent.

*The most notable narrative alignment with China's own image is that Russia is also believed to suffer under western aggression*

The argument that Russia has the right to defend itself against US or western hegemony reflects Beijing's official line on the Russo-Ukrainian war and serves as an almost commonsensical premise to support Russia's war effort. One article argues that the US and other NATO countries have been testing Russia's patience for years, first by introducing economic sanctions, then providing long-range missiles, "allowing Ukraine to attack Russian targets," and finally threatening to

take Kaliningrad.<sup>36</sup> "The sinister intentions behind it [the west] are obvious," writes the author. More troublingly, this argument is used to justify the potential use of nuclear weapons by Russia, making it clear that Moscow cannot be blamed if it resorts to this option in self-defence. Commentators agree: "Putin has justice on his side. He has to fight to save his country. [...] For peace and a better tomorrow, justice must prevail," argues one commentator, and another adds that "Russia will never attack Europe first, but it is always attacked first." The latter argument

*Moscow's strategic narrative of painting itself as a victim and a defender of its rights has sunk deeply into Chinese public discourse*

is often repeated, showing that Moscow's strategic narrative of painting itself as a victim and a defender of its rights has sunk deeply into Chinese public discourse. Russia has no choice but to resist the western "onslaught," it is maintained, as it risks losing its strength, international standing, and even its statehood. For instance, as one commentator argues, this would lead to a situation where "Ukraine will join the European Union and NATO, and Russia's strategic space will diminish. At that time [of starting the war], Russia was facing NATO, an alliance of Europe and the US."<sup>37</sup>

Respect and self-esteem are important considerations in any Confucian society, including China. If respect is withheld, a person may lose face (面子) and suffer severe psychological consequences.<sup>38</sup> One author takes Russia's side because "Russians have not been respected and recognised by western

<sup>34</sup> The three types of narrative persuasion according to Lu and Zhang are (1) the continuity narrative, which insists that "it has always been like this," (2) the analogy narrative, which suggests that two cases are similar, and (3) the identification narrative, which suggests that if something has happened to the out-group it will also happen to the in-group. Xiaoyu Lu, Tinghao Zhang, "The Russian factor: emotions, narratives and reshaping China's norms in international conflicts," *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (2024).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (Vintage, 2018), 522–526.

<sup>36</sup> 领导力智库 (Lingdao Zhiku), [俄罗斯危险！国运一战！](#) [Russia is in danger! A decisive battle for the nation's destiny!], *Jinri Toutiao*, 5 August 2025 – accessed 5 August 2025.

<sup>37</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后](#) (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Dexia Kong, Yin-Ling Irene Wong, Xinqi Dong, "[Face-Saving and Depressive Symptoms Among US Chinese Older Adults](#)," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2020).

Europeans.”<sup>39</sup> The article makes an argument that, for long periods of Europe’s history, Russia was disregarded by its western neighbours as a backward society of barbarian peasants. And even though Muscovy “finally completed the task of unification and became an important foundation for the formation of modern Tsarist Russia [...] western Europeans do not seem to appreciate Russians.” This belief resonates with the Chinese audience because humiliation – i.e., being deprived of self-worth and self-respect – looms large in China’s historical imagination. Scholars broadly agree that many Chinese people still carry a sense of humiliation, that some have countered this painful sentiment by expressing anger and striving for China’s rejuvenation, and that the CCP leverages the humiliation narrative to serve its political interests.<sup>40</sup> Although the article stops just shy of explicitly applauding Russia’s war in Ukraine, the implicit meaning is evident enough: Russia is owed respect, but because respect is not forthcoming, Russia has the right to do whatever it takes to protect itself and maintain face.

Russia is seen not only as a victim of western aggression, but also as a benevolent and even a humane (人性化) force on the world stage. “History has long shown that Russia is definitely the most peace-loving superpower,” notes one commentator.<sup>41</sup> Given that Russia’s victim status is beyond question, such opinions are not counterintuitive to many Chinese. Much along the lines of the previous opinion, some argue that Russia has joined China in the fight for justice. For example, one comment asks, “Could Russia fail?” and answers: “The fight for justice can never be lost.”<sup>42</sup> Putin is also sometimes depicted as benevolent: “The main reason Russia’s war against Ukraine was

not decided quickly is that Putin did not want to hurt the Ukrainian people.”<sup>43</sup>

All blame is placed upon the west. The depiction of western countries and their allies as evil is equally commonsensical, although here we have to make some distinctions between the US, Ukraine, and Japan on the one hand, and western European countries on the other. The latter are viewed somewhat more benevolently.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, when it comes to examples of historical villains, it is the western Europeans who are most often cited. Western leaders are compared to Hitler and Napoleon, who forced Russia into war, just as the US and NATO are doing now.<sup>45</sup> Although Hitler and Napoleon never threatened China’s territorial integrity directly, they are well known among the populace. More importantly, because Germany was allied to the Japanese Empire during the Second World War, referring to Nazi atrocities against Russia makes the Chinese think of (and feel) their own traumatic experiences with Imperial Japan. According to some analysts, the Chinese public’s fear of Japan and its military prowess is still widespread precisely because of this historical backdrop, which helps invigorate Sino-Russian emotional resonance.<sup>46</sup>

Although Russia and China are often depicted as fellow victims of western aggression, their acute geopolitical situations may be seen differently. As one commentator argues: “Russia is bullied by the United States and the west, and is squeezed into the corner.”<sup>47</sup> This is similar to China, as we have seen above. Another parallel is that both China and Russia are considered great countries, and “there are some things a great country [Russia] cannot

<sup>39</sup> 文辰国学 (Wenchen Guoxue), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 15 August 2025.

<sup>40</sup> William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives*, Vol. 29 (2004).

<sup>41</sup> Comment to 脑洞科普君 (Naodong Kepujun), [俄罗斯，为什么停不下扩张的脚步？](#) [Russia, why can’t it stop the pace of expansion?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 25 August 2022 – accessed 15 August 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>44</sup> Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war,” 4.

<sup>45</sup> 文辰国学 (Wenchen Guoxue), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 15 August 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Yanan He, “Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 50, No. 16 (2007), 3.

<sup>47</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

bear.” Yet China’s cultural characteristics and geopolitical position are different: “It seems that our country can tolerate it [western aggression], for it has its own background of toleration [可忍的背景].” This has led the two countries down different paths. “Russia can’t stand it [...]. Therefore, Russia has risen up and fights, while we [the Chinese] will wait for our opportunity to rise.” In either case, the

*China and Russia are portrayed as ‘great’ and ascendant, emphasising their similarities over differences*

outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the fate of the west seems to be sealed. “The United States is afraid that it will be outdone. Great countries compete for glory, and [this fight] is timely. [...] Now, with the decline of the west, how can Russia stay down?” The differences between China and Russia notwithstanding, both countries are portrayed as ‘great’ and ascendant, emphasising their similarities over differences.

### 2.1.2. AN ASIAN POWER

Russia is sometimes described as an Asian power or partly Asian in essence, creating a cognitive bridge between the Chinese and the Russians as fellow Asians. This orientalisng narrative harks back to the Mongolian conquest of the Russian steppe (13<sup>th</sup> century) and the subjugation of the Muscovite territories, which is seen in Russian mainstream historiography as a humiliation.<sup>48</sup> “The rule of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty over China from 1279 to 1368 had been nearly a century shorter than the Golden Horde’s overlordship of Russia, and partly for this reason the Chinese seem to have been somewhat less traumatised in the long run than the Russians were by the ‘Mongol yoke,’” writes Philp Snow in his monumental overview of Sino-Russian relations.<sup>49</sup> But there are exceptions. Alexander Dugin considers the Mongol invasion of Muscovy a blessing.<sup>50</sup> Occasionally, Russians themselves are

<sup>48</sup> Callahan, “Chinese global orders,” 8.

<sup>49</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* (Arktogeia, 2000), 614.

described as “half Mongolian,”<sup>51</sup> a statement that is accompanied by the notion that this makes them inferior in the eyes of other Europeans and feeds the insecurities about their self-worth discussed above. More often, Russia’s Asian-ness builds on the fact that it has amalgamated some aspects of Asia into its political or cultural core. For instance, one article notes that “after the fusion of east and west, Russia has both the toughness of the west and the wisdom of the east!”<sup>52</sup> According to one study, the fact that Russians may appear cold but are actually quite hospitable and warm also comes from integrating eastern and western characteristics.<sup>53</sup>

### 2.1.3. STRONGMAN LEADERSHIP

China’s intellectual elites abandoned all political aspirations towards liberal democracy after the Tiananmen protests in 1989 and adopted the position that the west and its political ideals are decadent.<sup>54</sup> China’s propaganda now maintains that liberal democracy is not suitable for the People’s Republic. China’s Confucian heritage hinders the development of democracy, as some have argued, and makes strongman leadership feel more natural.<sup>55</sup> Also, it is a widely held belief among the Chinese public that China’s vast land area, enormous population, and unique sociopolitical conditions make instituting western-style liberal democracy unfeasible. There is evidence that the Chinese are content with their current political system.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Comment to 文辰国学 (Wenchen Guoxue), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 16 August 2025.

<sup>52</sup> “[The history of Russia’s breaking and Slavic glory. Russia, which has been rejected by the West, is still proud.](#)” *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 October 2021 – (no longer accessible).

<sup>53</sup> Senina et al., “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” 13.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, “Neoconservatism and the End of Dengist Era,” *Asian Survey*. Vol. 35, No. 7 (1995), 637; Ben Blanchard, “[China state media attacks Western democracy ahead of Congress](#),” *Reuters*, 17 October 2017 – 26 June 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Lucian W. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China’s Political Cultures* (Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, 1988).

<sup>56</sup> Zhengxu Wang, “[Public Support for Democracy in China](#),” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16, No. 53 (2007).

These narratives provide ample opportunity to build emotional resonance with other authoritarian states, such as Russia. Putin is highly admired in China. In many ways, Putin personifies Russia in the eyes of the Chinese. According to Senina and Poliakova,

## *Putin personifies Russia in the eyes of the Chinese*

“The perception of the image of a particular state leader in China depends on that leader’s stance on relations with China: the image of the country as a whole is closely connected with the personality of the country’s leader.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, if Putin is held in high regard, so too is Russia. Other studies have confirmed this notion.<sup>58</sup> Putin is constantly on TV and other media outlets, and bookstores are filled with biographies about him. Putin is seen as the single most important factor in shaping Sino-Russian relations. This image is further enhanced by Putin’s personal relationship with Xi Jinping, who considers him “a dear friend,” even though some analysts have pointed out that this bond is purely strategic and that friendship with Putin hides Xi’s personal disdain for Russia, which can be traced back to his days working at the Central Military Commission.<sup>59</sup> (By way of a historical parallel, Peter the Great and Emperor Kangxi also regarded each other as friends in 1721, but Peter’s request for greater economic and diplomatic engagement was rebuffed by Beijing, and the two states were soon on the brink of war again).<sup>60</sup> In sum, Putin plays an outside role in the Chinese imagination of Russia.<sup>61</sup>

One of Putin’s most appealing characteristics is his political strength, a trait he is believed to share with Xi. Both leaders have gone to great lengths to crack down on political dissent, centralise political power in their own

hands, and cultivate an image of omnipotence peppered with signs of omniscience. In China, a strong political leader is considered best suited to deal with the multiple domestic and international challenges facing the country. Russia is seen to face much the same predicaments (particularly the “hegemonic” west), and, therefore, it is believed that Putin’s authoritarian style of leadership is justified. “Russia can only have enough cohesion under the leadership of a strongman,” notes one article, likening Putin to Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Stalin, and playing upon the Chinese fear of social anarchy and territorial disunity.<sup>62</sup> Putin is himself occasionally referred to as “Putin the Great” (普京大帝), a title that could just as easily be translated as “Emperor Putin.” He is revered as a strongman (强人), in the tradition of historical Russian leaders like Stalin, who bears some similarities to popular Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping.<sup>63</sup> There is a widespread belief that Russia is unbeatable under such a leader. According to one article: “If Russia wants to turn Ukraine into a district of its own, it will not be difficult for Putin, a political strongman.”<sup>64</sup> This opinion reflects a kind of social Darwinist thinking that ‘only the strong survive’ and resonates with the official messaging China has used to legitimise Xi’s shift from collective leadership to a strongman model, which may account for its widespread appeal.<sup>65</sup>

The cult of a strongman is not without its negative parallels. According to this counterpoint, Putin is not a wise leader of his people but a trickster, a cheat who has led Russia down a path of economic doom, all the while confidently putting up a mirage

<sup>57</sup> Senina et al., “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” 8.

<sup>58</sup> Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war.”

<sup>59</sup> Senina et al., “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” 5; Michael Sheridan, *The Red Emperor: Xi Jinping and His New China* (Headline Press), 74.

<sup>60</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 53–55.

<sup>61</sup> Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war,” 12.

<sup>62</sup> “[The history of Russia’s breaking and Slavic glory. Russia, which has been rejected by the West, is still proud](#),” *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 October 2021 – no longer accessible.

<sup>63</sup> Senina et al., “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” 12.

<sup>64</sup> 军武次位面 (Junwu Ciweimian). [历史上寸土必争的俄罗斯，为什么要把阿拉斯加低价卖给美国人？](#) [In history, Russia has fought for every inch of its land, why did it sell Alaska to Americans at a low price?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 09 March 2022 – accessed 17 September 2025.

<sup>65</sup> Nimrod Baranovitch, “[A Strong Leader for A Time of Crisis: Xi Jinping’s Strongman Politics as A Collective Response to Regime Weakness](#),” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 30, No. 128 (2020).

of stability.<sup>66</sup> Alternatively, some netizens perceive Russia's future positively, but only as long as it is led by Putin. An article titled "Once Putin Steps Down, Russia May Face Five Major Problems in the Next Ten Years" is a case in point, demonstrating great faith in Putin's leadership but warning of troubled times ahead.<sup>67</sup> Another author suggests that the current amicable relations between Russia and China hinge on Putin's leadership, but that after his reign ends, the Chinese will take back the lands once part of their empire:

*Some netizens perceive Russia's future positively, but only as long as it is led by Putin*

"In the post-Putin era, if the US withdraws from Asia, our fortunes in the north will be very promising! Gentlemen, don't forget the national humiliation."<sup>68</sup> These opinions demonstrate that the strongman narrative can be upheld alongside a negative depiction of Russia, potentially serving as a warning to and criticism of the Chinese leadership. I will return to this narrative below, but suffice to add here that such a negative mirror image could only have emerged in reaction to an already widespread positive image that is, for all intents and purposes, predominant.

#### 2.1.4. A LARGE COUNTRY

Another factor that is used to liken China to Russia is the fact that Russia is territorially vast. This notion also originates in the CCP's campaign against liberal democracy, where China's large land area is offered as an excuse for why western-style political reforms are unfeasible. A study by Sorokina et al. found that Russia's "geographic and natural characteristics and demographic elements"

are the "main component" of Russia's image among Chinese students.<sup>69</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that the Chinese think of Russia as an equally large country. "Russia is a very well-known country in the world, and most people know something about this country," notes one author, and points out that "Russia is not only the largest country in the world in terms of area, but also has a very strong military."<sup>70</sup> "The fact that the territory is immense is the root cause of people's admiration," notes one commentator.<sup>71</sup> And this exchange of opinions is equally illuminating: "The country is big, it must be a good thing!" exclaims one commentator, to which another adds: "Yes, how can you think that your country has too much land, each inch of land is an inch of gold!"<sup>72</sup> These sentiments show that a large land area is a highly esteemed trait by Chinese netizens, and because Russia is enormous, it is perceived as great and similar to China. This analogy helps to engender emotional resonance between the two countries.

However, this narrative is also not without its negative counterpoints. Although in most cases, a large landmass seems admirable, in some instances, commentators find it necessary to warn their audience that the country is too large. "The earth-eating Tsarist Russia is too large, not a good thing," notes one comment, while another article makes a more elaborate point: "After rounds of expansion, Russia has changed from a minute corner to the world's largest country that spans Asia and Europe, and so it has become an arrogant country. The root of this arrogance is both historical tradition and national character. The

<sup>66</sup> 起起伏伏才完美 (Qiqi Fufu Cai Wanmei). [普京统治俄罗斯25年，他的铁腕是挡不住接下来的大变局的](#) [Putin has ruled Russia for 25 years, and his iron fist cannot stop the next big changes], *Jinri Toutiao*, 18 July 2025 – accessed 19 July 2025.

<sup>67</sup> 送人头 (Song Rentou). [普京一旦卸任，俄罗斯未来10年，可能面临的五大难题…](#) [Once Putin steps down, Russia may face five major problems in the next 10 years...], *Jinri Toutiao*, 05 August 2025 – accessed 05 August 2025.

<sup>68</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Sorokina et al., "Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth," 153.

<sup>70</sup> 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄罗斯崛起有多快，看其历史就知道了，每隔一段时间就会崛起](#) [How fast is Russia's rise can be seen from its history, and it will rise every once in a while.], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 October 2021 – accessed 19 May 2025.

<sup>71</sup> Comment to 文辰国学 (Wenchen Guoxue), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 16 August 2025.

<sup>72</sup> Comment to 地理研究舍 (Dili Yanjiushe), [国土面积大并不是好事？](#) [Isn't a large country a good thing?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 April 2024 – accessed 16 August 2025.

national emblem of the double-headed eagle is the symbol of this arrogance.”<sup>73</sup>

Analogy, therefore, is the main narrative type used to engender emotional resonance with Russia. The narratives outlined above assert that Russia, in many respects, is much like China – a fellow victim of western aggression – and so must do all it can to protect itself. These narratives sideline all differences between the two countries and make no mention of the fact that imperial Russia occupied vast expanses of Qing territory, although it is hard to believe that the authors are oblivious to it. This omission is necessary, however, as admitting Russia’s past atrocities would counter the aim of depicting it as a victim and engendering sympathy for its predicament. Therefore, it is justified to conclude that analogy-based narrative persuasion comprised highly artificial cultural constructs that take their cue from Beijing’s official playbook. Whether

*Analogy-based narrative persuasion comprised highly artificial cultural constructs that take their cue from Beijing’s official playbook*

Russia is threatened or attacked, or it is simply humiliated and not respected enough, these rationales create emotional resonance with Chinese experiences and, therefore, serve to create approval in China of Moscow’s current policies.

## 2.2. PLAYING UP RUSSIA’S STRENGTHS

In addition to the analogy narratives, Russia benefits from many narratives that are not necessarily attributable to China. Some, but not all, correspond to the continuity type, as outlined by Lu and Zhang. This type insists that “it has always been like this” and thereby creates a natural path towards accepting new realities (norms and goals). This can be seen in the narrative that treats Russia as a natural

<sup>73</sup> Comment to 文辰国学 (Wenchen Guoxue), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 16 August 2025.

great power and the inevitable victor in the conflict with Ukraine. (There are exceptions to the following analysis, as some of the opinions that voice support for Russia by playing up its strengths are too rudimentary to be categorised as continuity narratives.)

### 2.2.1. RUSSIA’S VICTORY IS INEVITABLE

Opinions about Russia’s military strengths and the prospects of victory over Ukraine or the US proliferate in China’s internet space. Some of them deem Russia’s victory a forgone conclusion and, in this sense, correspond to the teleological inevitability of the continuity prototype. Most of these opinions show support for Russia in short bursts of approval. The *Jinri Toutiao* commentaries are filled with comments such as “Remember, Russia will definitely not fail”<sup>74</sup> and “Support Russia, support Putin the Great, Russia will win.”<sup>75</sup> Other comments demonstrate more knowledge about Russia to support this opinion. It is believed that Russia’s economy and military are in good shape and its military is quite capable of resisting the Americans. One commentator argues, “Russia cannot fail! First, the Russian army did not use heavy weapons, and second, it did not want to hurt ordinary people in large numbers.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, we have yet to witness Russia’s real strength. Others point to the nuclear option to keep faith in Russia’s victory: “Russia is getting braver and braver, and Ukraine is almost unable to resist. If the US and European countries dare to join the war, Russia will give them a big gift [nuclear bomb].”<sup>77</sup> Another comment in the same thread notes: “Even if NATO countries expand eastwards, they will not do anything

<sup>74</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>75</sup> 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 07 August 2025.

<sup>76</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks.], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>77</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

to Russia. After all, there are so many nuclear weapons and nuclear submarines [in Russia's possession]."

To substantiate their belief in Russia's inevitable victory, some netizens draw historical parallels with Russia's past military achievements. Just like the efforts of Napoleon and Nazi Germany, they claim, NATO's "expansion" onto Russia's lands will also grind to a halt. The primary reason given for this is Russia's strategic depth, as one comment explains: "St Petersburg is surrendered? Retreat to Moscow. Is Moscow in danger? Retreat to the Urals."<sup>78</sup> Russia is "a behemoth standing on the land of Eastern Europe that has always had the last laugh," even against Napoleon and Hitler, argues one article.<sup>79</sup> The image of Russia laughing is disconcertingly frequent. Here is one more example: "Russia will laugh at the end, and the US and the west will die miserably."<sup>80</sup>

Narratives of the continuity prototype do not foresee Russia's downfall. Indeed, even if Russia does not have the last laugh and loses the war, it is believed, it will rise again. The teleological inevitability demonstrating blind fate in Russia's eventual triumph seems to be characteristic only of the victory narrative – depictions of Russia's military weakness and potential downfall have more nuance and detail, as I will discuss below.

### 2.2.2. MILITARY CHARACTER

Parallel to the inevitable victory narrative run beliefs that Russia and Russians possess a military core that cannot be vanquished. Here we encounter for the first time the characteristically essentialist thinking that seems to have permeated Chinese society,

making beliefs about Russia's military prowess difficult to shift. Essentialism is a worldview that defines things according to their inevitable characteristics.<sup>81</sup> States, nations, and people are assumed to have a trait that is intrinsically part of their character. Russia, in the eyes of many Chinese netizens, is

*Russia, in the eyes of many Chinese netizens, is essentially militaristic and warlike*

essentially militaristic and warlike. And most see this as a good thing. But this essentialist reading of Russia is also attributable to more critical remarks, as I demonstrate below.

The assumed military and warlike essence is perhaps best reflected in the multiple aliases and nicknames used for Russia and its people. The most prominent among them is "fighting nation" (战斗民族), an alias that carries multiple militaristic traits. For example, as one author notes, "Russia is a fighting nation. It is fearless and not afraid of sacrifice in the face of strong enemies until it defeats them."<sup>82</sup> It is also held that Putin is their natural leader and that "he deserves to be the leader of the fighting nation."<sup>83</sup> The Chinese term "fighting nation" first appeared in 2013 and became widespread the following year. According to Senina and Poliakova, "fighting nation" is considered by some to be an unofficial name for Russia, making Russia the only country in China's official rhetoric to have an official "second name."<sup>84</sup> Although Chinese media has tried to turn the tables on this and portray China (rather than Russia) as the most vehement fighting nation of them all, Russia's military image persists. Among Chinese students, Russia is most commonly associated with rockets and tanks, and its

<sup>78</sup> 刚发的说过24890 (Gangfa De Shuoguo 24890), [俄国国土无险可守，为何却能四次实现翻盘崛起呢？](#) [Russia has no problem defending its territory, but how did it achieve a rise four times over?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 16 July 2025.

<sup>79</sup> 文辰国学 (Wenchen Guoxue), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 15 August 2025.

<sup>80</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\)](#), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>81</sup> Richard L. Cartwright, "Some remarks on essentialism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 65, No. 20 (1968), 615.

<sup>82</sup> Comment to [文辰国学 \(Wenchen Guoxue\)](#), [从拿破仑到希特勒，为何都要进攻俄国？俄国究竟是怎样的存在？](#) [From Napoleon to Hitler, why they attacked Russia? What is Russia really like?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 30 September 2021 – accessed 15 August 2025.

<sup>83</sup> [军武次位面 \(Junwu Ciweimian\)](#), [历史上寸土必争的俄罗斯，为什么要把阿拉斯加低价卖给美国人？](#) [In history, Russia has fought for every inch of its land, why did it sell Alaska to Americans at a low price?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 17 September 2025.

<sup>84</sup> Senina et al., "[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#)," 9.

overall military strength, although some note that this is just a stereotype.<sup>85</sup> According to a recent study, this narrative is – together with Putin’s strongman image – partly responsible for Russia’s increasingly positive image among the Chinese public in the past few years.<sup>86</sup>

Another term used to describe Russia’s warlike essence is “military ethos” (军人精神). One author who used this term explains:

The military ethos of Russia has continued from the time of the Muscovite Principality, and now it has not only not decreased but has been strengthened. [...] No country dares to compete with a country where the whole population is armed. This is obvious. So, poverty is not a big problem, as long as the spirit of martial arts exists. No matter how powerful a country is, once it meddles with Russia, it will eventually be killed.<sup>87</sup>

Essentialist readings of Russia’s character also include notions that attribute to it other inherent strengths. Some articles seem to recognise that Russia is not doing well but, nevertheless, claim that it is great. One author wrote before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine:

If we understand the history of Russia, we find that it is really easy for this country to rise. Simply put, every once in a while, Russia rises, and it rises very fast. [...] No matter what kind of environment this country is in, and how many countries it is suppressed by, it will rise when you are not paying attention. Suddenly, it has become a dominant presence. This is the real Russia.<sup>88</sup>

This seems to be a well-known narrative among Chinese netizens. A similar point is made by another author, noting that Russia “has been strong for over 500 years. This is almost a miracle, [it is] stronger than Britain, the United States, Germany, etc., and even stronger than the most powerful Han and Tang Dynasties of our country.”<sup>89</sup>

But not everyone believes in Russia’s military essence, nor is it always presumed to guarantee victory. “The reason why Russia is respected and feared is because of its warlikeness and fierce fighting [...] gaining the title of a fighting nation [战斗民族],” writes one author, recognising Russia’s image as well earned. But the author hastens to add that this is no guarantee for victory.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the author is convinced that Russia, perhaps because of its warlike nature, has been time and time again lured into a trap that it cannot escape. This was the case when the USSR destroyed itself by invading Afghanistan, the author argues, and it will be the case again in Ukraine, because “the west continued to push Ukraine to fight to the death with Russia [...] causing Russia to fall into a trap.” Writing a year after the full-scale invasion began, the author noted that “Russia has suffered a series of failures and the whole country has been dragged down. Only now did it [Russia] realise that it had been fooled [自己上当了].” Yet there is nothing it can do now, “it’s too late.” The article sums up Russia’s choice as follows: “Now Russia is in a dilemma. If it escalates the war, it may not win. If it compromises, the failure is clear: the appearance [颜面] of a great country is lost, and the future of the whole country is destroyed. It [Russia] will be miserable.”

The fact that Russia’s military essence is not always seen as a silver bullet for victory makes this narrative stand apart from the abovementioned narrative of Russia’s inevitable triumph. Indeed, some consider Russia a “former fighting nation” (emphasis added) because Russia is seen as losing the war.<sup>91</sup> Alternatively, Russia may retain its military veneer, but lose the war, nevertheless, as one author argues: “For hundreds of years, Russia has been warlike, but not good at war. If there is no absolute superiority in military strength, the victory of the Russian army is

<sup>85</sup> Sorokina et al., “Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth,” 157.

<sup>86</sup> Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war,” 5.

<sup>87</sup> “Why has Russia been so strong?,” *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – (no longer accessible).

<sup>88</sup> 以史为镜的背后 (Yishi Weijing Beihou), 俄罗斯崛起有多快, 看其历史就知道了, 每隔一段时间就会崛起 [How fast is Russia’s rise can be seen from its history, and it will rise every once in a while.], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 October 2021 – accessed 19 May 2025.

<sup>89</sup> “Why has Russia been so strong?,” *Jinri Toutiao*.

<sup>90</sup> 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”, 可惜已经晚了 [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>91</sup> 起起伏伏才完美 (Qiqi Fufu Cai Wanmei), 普京统治俄罗斯25年, 他的铁腕是挡不住接下来的大变局的 [Putin has ruled Russia for 25 years, and his iron fist cannot stop the next big changes], *Jinri Toutiao*, 18 July 2025 – accessed 19 July 2025.

hopeless.”<sup>92</sup> In sum, not everyone is convinced that Russia’s military essence makes it unbeatable, and some even think that it has lost its military prowess.

The examples above portray a strong tendency among Chinese netizens to think in terms of essentialist characteristics and believe in Russia’s inevitable victory. The essentialist trait of Russia’s image is curious because it goes against both Marxist and Confucian epistemology. Marxist thinking is rooted in dialectical materialism and stresses that reality is historically conditioned and dynamic. According to Marx, human nature should be understood as the “ensemble of social relations,” not as a fixed essence.<sup>93</sup> The Confucian cosmology envisions a malleable human nature with weak biological or psychological constraints. Accordingly, the shortcomings of human nature can be overcome by proper education.<sup>94</sup> Portraying Russia as essentially militaristic, therefore, is not very natural from the perspectives of two prominent Chinese cultural traditions.

That being said, both images of Russia – as an inevitable victor and as essentially militaristic – fall under the continuity type that, in most cases, sustains the emotional resonance between the two countries. The view that Russia and Russians have always been a “fighting nation” with a military bent means they will naturally be seen as more likely to win wars. Most adherents of this narrative are convinced that it has been like that in the past and it will remain so in the future.

<sup>92</sup> 静夜史 (Jing Ye Shi), 俄国征兵，蒙古不爽？为何蒙古前总统反对俄罗斯动员蒙古裔士兵？[Russia conscripts, Mongolia is not happy? Why did the former president of Mongolia oppose mobilising Mongolian soldiers into Russia’s forces?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 27 September 2022 – accessed 19 May 2025.

<sup>93</sup> Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (Verso, 1983), 39–42.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas A. Metzger, *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theory Today* (The Chinese University Press, 2005), 25.

### 3. PRAGMATIC ARGUMENTS

In addition to the unquestionably positive opinions about Russia, many Chinese netizens hold positions that are more neutral on Russia’s sociopolitical situation and the Russo-Ukrainian war. Here we find posts and comments that voice a pragmatic argument, most commonly that China and Russia need each other in their struggle against American supremacy. Although these positions tend to support Russia’s struggle against the west, they may not see Russia in a positive light. Much like the previous narratives, they sometimes overlook (intentionally or not) Russia’s history of colonial aggression towards China, but not always.

#### 3.1. ALLIANCE AGAINST THE US

The only discernible pragmatic narrative about Russia is that it is helping China defeat its real enemy, the US and the collective west.

*The only discernible pragmatic narrative about Russia is that it is helping China defeat its real enemy, the US and the collective west*

Analogous to this geopolitical calculation is the belief that Russia is needed to bring about China’s socioeconomic rise. Both subnarratives are highly pragmatic, if not cynical. Although the methodological limitation of this analysis does not allow generalisations about the Chinese populace at large, the pragmatic take on the Sino-Russian relationship does appear to be very widely held.

There is precedent for a military alliance between Russia and China. A year after the Qing had been humiliatingly defeated by Japan and had signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, the two continental empires signed the Li–Lobanov Treaty to prevent Japan from getting a larger foothold in the Far East. This was a sign, according to Philip Snow, “that Russia was still inclined, in a way its competitors weren’t, to look upon China as in some sense an equal” – an increasingly rare

opinion among western colonial powers.<sup>95</sup> After decades of struggle and conflict, Moscow and Beijing were once again on the same side of history after the establishment of Marxist regimes in both capitals. Founded in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) looked to the Soviet Union for material support and intellectual guidance, seeming to forgive Russia's imperialist trespasses. In reality, this was not an easy relationship from the start. After 1927, Stalin's flip-flopping policies, support for the Kuomintang, and contradictory recommendations to the Chinese communists greatly harmed the fledgling CCP. In Snow's words: "The CCP never really recovered their faith in the Soviet Union."<sup>96</sup> But this backlash was set aside temporarily, and cooperation could continue in the name of the Revolution. The two powers fell out again during the first half of the 1960s. This history is significant for current Sino-Russian relations and Russia's image in the Chinese public. For Chinese people who have never visited their northern

intentions and the rise of Greater China."<sup>98</sup> One could even argue that, in this statement, Moscow's objectives are interpreted as being altruistic – not in service of Russia's aims alone. Here is another example: "China and the US are in a life-and-death struggle. Russia stood up and blocked a shot for China."<sup>99</sup> Aligned with this opinion are comments that praise Russia's contribution to constructing a new world order: "Russia broke the dreams of Americans with their action! The world will change from now on. The decline of the US and the west will accelerate because of that."<sup>100</sup> Indeed, some believe that "Russia has become the leader of the anti-American/anti-western countries and has increased its international prestige."<sup>101</sup> Even if these statements are read more cynically, with no altruistic intent in mind, we can see that some netizens perceive Russia's activities against the US as truly helpful, benefiting China's own goals (including changing the world order to their liking) and paving its way to great-power status. Such opinions overlook Russia's colonial trespasses, sustain Russia's positive image, and thereby contribute to emotional resonance.

### *The perception of Russia is closely tied to the image of the Soviet Union and its heritage*

neighbour, the perception of Russia is closely tied to the image of the Soviet Union and its heritage.<sup>97</sup> More to the point, many Chinese still think back to the old Cold War era with nostalgia – particularly to the era of amicable relations between the Soviet Union and China – making partnership with Russia feel quite natural.

But such a reading of the Sino-Russian partnership seems to be an exception to the rule. More often than not, the partnership is seen without this rose-tinted veneer. "Russia's countermeasures against the US are to defend its own national sovereignty, security and development interests," notes one author.<sup>102</sup> Echoing Moscow's official narrative, the author

#### 3.1.1. GEOPOLITICAL PARTNER

Interpretations of Russia's intentions and China's aims in the Sino-Russian struggle against US hegemony come in different forms. The simplest (and perhaps even most simple-minded) reading is to view the partnerships as sincere and genuinely beneficial. As one comment puts it: "Russia plans to hold back the US and the west, which is in line with China's

<sup>98</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>99</sup> Comment to [张元伟 \(Zhang Yuanwei\), 俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 09 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>100</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>101</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>102</sup> [静夜史 \(Jing Ye Shi\), 俄国恩情报不尽，伊朗人情还不完？中国欠俄罗斯和伊朗多少人情？](#) [Can we ever pay Russia's kindness, can we ever pay Iran's kindness? How much does China owe to Russia and Iran?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 21 July 2025 – accessed 21 July 2025.

<sup>95</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 149.

<sup>96</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 247–248.

<sup>97</sup> Senina et al., "[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#)," 16.

deems Russia's reaction "inevitable," given that the US "is pushing NATO's expansion eastward and constantly squeezing Russia's strategic space." However, the article also makes quite clear that this is no favour to China – Russia's aim is not to fend off aggression towards China, as some netizens seem to maintain. The article, therefore, concludes, "although there is extensive strategic cooperation between China and Russia, this is a cooperative relationship based on equality and mutual benefit, rather than one party being subordinate to the other, and in no way is Russia 'sacrificing' itself for China." To the question of whether China relies on Russia's help to overcome US hegemony, some say that "it is delusional to expect Russia to hold back the American Empire." Another adds: "The United States will not give up attacking you [China], whether Russia is victorious or not."

The altruistic and the realist perceptions of Sino-Russian relations are both rather forgiving in nature, for they do not explicitly acknowledge Russia's hand in the collapse of the Qing state.

Russia's past aggression is also disregarded in narratives that follow the identification type of narrative, which instils a sense of urgency in the audience by implying that if nothing is done, the in-group is destined to experience the same fate as the out-group. The argument maintains that after Russia has been vanquished, China will be next, and that the Sino-Russian alliance is justified because the alternative is unthinkable. A video by Zhang Yuanwei titled "If Russia Loses the War, China May Face Many Risks" is dedicated to this eventuality and includes comments like "as soon as Russia collapses, all anti-American countries must kneel!"<sup>103</sup> Although this narrative strand does not in itself make Russia seem benevolent, it may boost Russia's image and mutual emotional resonance by creating anxiety by alluding to a future threat, a threat that Russia is already facing.

Most comments hold that "the current friendship with Russia is just the result of the pressure from the US," alluding to the notion

<sup>103</sup> 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

that Russia is not a natural ally for China, and that once pressure across the Atlantic is lifted, Russia's role is due to change.<sup>104</sup> This narrative entails a rather instrumentalist reading of Russia's role in the struggle against western hegemony. For example:

If you are strong, you don't have to be afraid of anything. It's correct to have warm relations with Russia now. It's clear that the most urgent thing for us [Chinese] at present is to recover Taiwan. Given that the US, the west, and Japan will definitely oppose us, so let's at least try not to oppose Russia.<sup>105</sup>

Many Chinese netizens are aware of the historical grievances against Russia, but still argue for cooperation in the short term: "At

*Chinese netizens are aware of the historical grievances against Russia, but still argue for cooperation in the short term*

least they [Russia and China] are comrades in the same trench now. No matter how many 'grudges and hatred' they had in the past, they must put that aside for the time being. To fight the enemy together is the right way and the way to survive."<sup>106</sup> Indeed, Chinese netizens often appeal to the readers by evoking the widely used mantra "never forget national humiliation" and envision a future where Beijing takes back the territories that now form part of the Russian Federation. Some even go so far as to envision a near-term future in which the Chinese once again settle the northeastern lands of Siberia. In the previous comment, the author puts out an optimistic call: "I hope to see you all migrating [to Siberia] in no time!" This and other examples like it demonstrate

<sup>104</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>105</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>106</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [Zhang Yuanwei. If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks.], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

that cooperation with Moscow against the US and the collective west (as well as Japan) does not require China to ignore Russia's colonial aggression. This recognition makes the narrative of Sino-Russian geopolitical partnership truly pragmatic.

Bringing up Russia's colonial trespasses while arguing for the need to further cooperate with Moscow may seem contradictory, but it is not. One could argue that this interpretation of Sino-Russian relations describes the Chinese view better than the altruistic take. As the logic of united front work dictates, Russia is only an ally (or a partner) until the life-and-death "antagonistic contradictions" with the west are overcome, at which point past grievances with Russia become salient once again and turn the friend into an enemy. Russia belongs securely to the latter category, according to multiple comments on the article "Tsarist Russia Violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk..."<sup>107</sup> Some call for calm: "Now is not the time to make trouble." They would rather that China fight one enemy at a time. But this does not mean that the time will never come. "The territory of Greater China will be brought back by future generations sooner or later. Maybe not too long in the future. Timing is very important," insists one commentator. Another adds, "Let's talk about it in ten years." All seem to agree that "we [China] will have the final say."

### 3.1.2. ECONOMIC PARTNER

The geopolitical narrative is paralleled, and at the same time challenged, by the narrative that sees Russia as a partner in China's socioeconomic development. Economic progress and cooperation with other countries are serious matters to many Chinese people, oftentimes overshadowing the history-inspired nationalist grievances.<sup>108</sup> Here is one commentator giving economic partnerships with Russia precedence: "I firmly oppose those [...] who provoke separating

<sup>107</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>108</sup> Qin Pang, Nicholas Thomas, "Chinese Nationalism and Trust in East Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2017), 822.

China and Russia. China and Russia must be firm friends in order to build a stronger and richer motherland, and let the people live a better life."<sup>109</sup> Such statements are to be expected, given that Sino-Russian economic ties have reached record highs since the full-scale war in Ukraine started in early 2022.<sup>110</sup> The sheer pragmatism is qualified by a desire for individual betterment, presenting a clash between two cultural norms: patriotism and historical justice versus economic progress and personal welfare. Put differently, the history-inspired sense of patriotism can go against the instinct to seek personal welfare, forcing people to make a choice between (among other things) being friends with Russia or enemies. And some choose economic welfare and cooperation.

But this dilemma is acute only outside the logic of united front work. By postponing their revenge against Russia, it seems to be possible for some to have their cake and eat it too. This rationale is best observed in statements that argue for keeping calm and fostering economic cooperation with Russia for the foreseeable future. With Russia in mind, one commentator notes:

We should go beyond hatred. We should fight against anyone who is not good to China now and prevents us from recovering Taiwan, but doing business is inevitable. [...] Business and cooperation are still necessary. There is no need to take the initiative to make enemies.<sup>111</sup>

But this narrative often comes with a dash of contempt. "Russians have always been our evil neighbour, the black boss [黑老大]," writes a commentator in the same thread, hastening to add that "for now we should forget about these things, focus on construction, build up

<sup>109</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>110</sup> Hugo von Essen, "Russia-China Economic Relations Since the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *Swedish National China Centre*, July 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

national strength, and deal with the South China Sea issue. Historical matters are not too important.”<sup>112</sup> So setting aside Russia’s past aggression against China makes sense not only from the geopolitical perspective but also from the socioeconomic perspective. Yet this does not mean that Russia is forgiven or viewed positively. Such an approach seems to also suit the governing authorities, given that the CCP’s legitimacy rests increasingly on governance issues, such as providing quality education and healthcare, fighting pollution, and raising living standards.<sup>113</sup> From this perspective, Russia is indeed a valuable economic partner.

### 3.1.3. WARRING STATES AND THE ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

These pragmatic geopolitical and socioeconomic considerations are sometimes explained by historical references to the Warring States Period (c. 475–221 BC) and the legendary Chinese novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. For many Chinese people, there is no better cultural parallel to the current geopolitical situation than this novel, which describes the 220–280 AD civil war in China, when it was split among three large kingdoms. Also, Beijing’s strategists like to use the same historical analogies in pondering which fights to fight and which to postpone.<sup>114</sup>

*Parallels are drawn with The Romance of the Three Kingdoms by likening China and Russia to the Han and Wu states that together fight the dominant Wei state, which is analogous to the US*

Parallels are drawn with *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by likening China and Russia to the Han and Wu states that together fight the dominant Wei state, which is analogous to the US. For example, one comment reads: “China, the US, and Russia are the real-life

version of the Three Kingdoms era. China and Russia join forces against the US. The US cannot destroy China and Russia.”<sup>115</sup> Another comment makes an even more informed judgement: “China, Russia, the Han, and Wu [of the Three Kingdoms period] will have to join forces regardless of the shame of losing Jingzhou and suffering a defeat in Xiaoting.”<sup>116</sup> Jingzhou was a strategically crucial province in central China that was controlled by the Han (a stand-in for China) but was then lost to Eastern Wu (which parallels Russia) due to an error in strategic judgment. The defeat at Xiaoting marked the decline of the Han. In modern Chinese political commentary, these examples are often used metaphorically to describe loss and strategic blunders. However, both Jingzhou and Xiaoting are used here as direct references to past grievances suffered at the hands of the Russian Empire, which must be set aside for the sake of present necessities to counterbalance America’s superiority.

There are other pragmatic opinions held by Chinese netizens as well. This is a hotchpotch mixture of voices that focus on potential gains and lessons China could take away from Russia’s war in Ukraine. Some say China should root for Russia’s victory because of the need to maintain a great-power balance, but they shy away from wholehearted support for Russia’s cause.<sup>117</sup> One remarks, “So let them fight while we develop quietly” – a truly cynical opinion. But others caution against the potential of nuclear Armageddon. The fact that Russia is a nuclear power has created considerable anxiety among Chinese netizens. This anxiety arises in the context of the Ukraine war, which is sometimes seen as the opening move of the Third World War. For example, one comment says:

<sup>112</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), 沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信 [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>113</sup> Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator’s Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party’s Strategy for Survival* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 11–13.

<sup>114</sup> Callahan, “Chinese global orders,” 3.

<sup>115</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), 俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险 [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>116</sup> Comment to “If Russia hadn’t sold Alaska to the US, how big would Russia be?,” *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 December 2021 – (no longer accessible).

<sup>117</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), 俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险 [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

If Russia fails, it is possible that the earth will start anew, human beings may no longer exist today, Russia's nuclear weapons will not be left in vain, more than 6 000 nuclear warheads [...] will be launched, and the nuclear weapons of other countries in the world will not be idle. What would the Earth look like then!<sup>118</sup>

But none of these pragmatic opinions is as powerful as the alliance argument, wherein Russia's interests are seen as aligned with China's. With some notable exceptions, the pragmatic narratives do not contribute to building a positive image of Russia or Sino-Russian emotional resonance. Russia's role in the joint struggle against the west is instrumentalised, making it a necessary evil to be tolerated. Many netizens seem to maintain that the hatred (仇恨) of Russia is justified,

*Russia's role in the joint struggle against the west is instrumentalised, making it a necessary evil to be tolerated*

but it must be controlled for the time being in order for China to overcome the more pressing challenges of western hegemony or economic growth. There will come a day, they believe, when China will be strong enough, when the hegemony of the US will have been surmounted and China's socioeconomic troubles overcome, at which point China will square its relations with Russia and take back what is considered its rightful territories. This interpretation of Sino-Russian relations is made possible by the united front work logic, which advocates delaying "not-antagonistic confrontations" and focusing on life-and-death struggles first – a presumably difficult mental feat which is made easier to fathom by historical allusions to the Warring States Period and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

## 4. NEGATIVE DEPICTIONS OF RUSSIA

Negative opinions of Russia come in all varieties. Some are snappy comments, such as "a broken Russia is a good Russia!" or "Russia is very pitiful," while others read like academic articles diving deep into the rationale for regarding Russia as an enemy.<sup>119</sup> Some present elaborate arguments to prove Russia is a military and economic weakling, while others claim that it cannot be trusted as an ally and lump it together with Japan and other more traditional enemies of China. Of course, the negative depictions of Russia also include a wide range of historical examples of how Russia has violated China's territorial integrity.

Although the methodological limitation of this study prevents any generalisations as to how widely these opinions are held, the examples given offer an illustrative counterpoint to the overwhelmingly positive image of

Russia often seen in the official channels. If nothing else, the negative depictions of Russia balance the emotional resonance with Russia described in Chapter 1.

It seems that negative narratives on Russia have been reined in a bit since the last study period ended in March 2024. This conclusion is based on the fact that some of the very negative posts about Russia are no longer accessible, though, of course, there may be more mundane and less interesting reasons for this. If it is indeed the case that such posts have been deliberately suppressed, two potential explanations stand out. The first and perhaps most obvious is that Beijing is trying to show more support for Russia's endeavours in Ukraine. The second explanation is that negative remarks on Russia are increasingly recognised as a form of proxy criticism of Xi's regime.

### 4.1. RUSSIA IS WEAK

As a diametrical opposite to the arguments playing up Russia's (military) strengths and its

<sup>118</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), 俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险 [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>119</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了 [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

inevitable victory, this narrative sees Russia as economically and militarily weak and getting weaker. It is most likely a minority opinion, given that 71% of Chinese people consider Russia a strong economic power. Russia's military might is regarded higher still – 87% of the Chinese public thinks that Russia is militarily strong, which puts it on par with the US (86%) and only slightly below China itself (90%).<sup>120</sup> These numbers notwithstanding, opinions about Russia's weakness do abound. They try to read between the lines of official propaganda, but because information is limited, they sometimes come up with rather inventive ways to portray Russia as feeble and helpless.

#### 4.1.1. ECONOMIC AND MILITARY WEAKNESS

Part of Russia's weakness has to do with its economic difficulties and potential financial collapse, which are blamed on its geographical position and the character of its people. One

*Part of Russia's weakness has to do with its economic difficulties and potential financial collapse, which are blamed on its geographical position and the character of its people*

author takes a rather essentialist position to explain that “the resource giant [Russia] is still deep in an economic quagmire. The ice and snow of Siberia lock in the development potential, while Moscow's decision-making chain is too long and slow – in the end, congenital defects [先天缺陷] and human errors make it starve.”<sup>121</sup> The author further blames Russia's cold climate, describing it as “a shackle of development” [发展的枷锁], and also dubs the people “lazy” for not developing Siberia to its full potential. I demonstrated earlier that Russia's land size is considered an asset, a trait that makes it similar to China and thereby engenders emotional resonance between the two peoples. If we take this

<sup>120</sup>Turcsányi et al., “Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war,” 16.

<sup>121</sup>每天开心 (Meitian Kaixin), [跟着俄国混，三天饿九顿？俄国有这么多资源，为何搞不好经济](#) [Follow Russia and starve nine meals in three days? Russia has so many resources, why can't it have a good economy?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 20 July 2025 – accessed 20 July 2025.

opinion as an example, however, size can also be interpreted as a weakness.

Other authors blame the war for Russia's economic ruin and stress that the cost of war is weighing heavily on the Russian people. “Most ordinary people [in Russia] can only pretend to be optimistic about the doubling of the price of pickles and the shortage of milk,” writes one author, referring to a recent piece in *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>122</sup> According to the *Jinri Toutiao* article, Putin has managed to trick the public into supporting his “iron-fisted rule” for 25 years, but now the “myth of stability” is coming to an end, revealing a “hidden crisis” behind his regime. Another author argues that Russia's economy is already deemed puny in comparison to China's, given that “its GDP is equivalent to a province in China, and it won't last long.”<sup>123</sup>

Historical parallels also help explain Russia's economic predicament. “It is clear that the future of the country is being burned like firewood,” one recent article claims, referring to the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>124</sup> Listing Russia's military losses and economic difficulties, the author draws readers' attention to multiple historical similarities where Russia's defeat has been determined by its economic weakness. “Putin is driving an armoured car to repeat the same mistake,” the authors argue, with a reference to the 1980s Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a parallel Chinese netizens often use. In addition, the argument continues, we should not forget “how the Tsarist [regime] collapsed after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.” Even though the Russo-Japanese War was more a political and logistical blunder than an economic one,

<sup>122</sup>起起伏伏才完美 (Qiqi Fufu Cai Wanmei), [普京统治俄罗斯25年，他的铁腕是挡不住接下来的大变局的](#) [Putin has ruled Russia for 25 years, and his iron fist cannot stop the next big changes], *Jinri Toutiao*, 18 July 2025 – accessed 19 July 2025; Michael Kimmage, Maria Lipman, [“The Limits of Putin's Balancing Act: What the Kremlin Will Sacrifice in Pursuit of Victory in Ukraine,”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, 16 July 2025.

<sup>123</sup>Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>124</sup>微笑枫叶如风 (Weixiao Fengye Rufeng), [法国军事专家：“俄乌战争继续打下去，俄国将不复存在”](#) [French military expert: “If the war between Russia and Ukraine continues, Russia will no longer exist”], *Jinri Toutiao*, 15 July 2025 – accessed 16 July 2025.

and it was 12 years after the defeat that Tsar Nicolas II abdicated, the parallel alludes to the possibility that Russia's military debacle in Ukraine may just as easily lead to regime change in Moscow. Whatever the eventuality, the author is adamant that Russia will lose the current war in Ukraine, and if this happens, it will also lose its empire. Struggling to hold on to its territories in the Caucasus, it will have to give up some of the territories due to the "centrifugal force" that the war creates. Hence, the author concludes, "when the financial collapse corresponds with the ethnic conflicts," Russia will fall like its historical predecessors.

I referred to an article above that showed support for Putin as a strongman, but at the same time was critical of Russia's future prospects.<sup>125</sup> The author of that article lists a plethora of socioeconomic and political ills plaguing Russia. For starters, Russia's income from carbon-based fuels is diminishing: "Russian oil can't be sold at a good price. If this continues, the economy will definitely collapse faster." This makes it difficult to sustain the military effort: "Missile submarines are slow to build, bombers are old and finished, and the old equipment used in war is seriously worn out." The Russian military is weak, unable to protect Russian cities from drone strikes, and is reliant on the nuclear option to keep up appearances. But even this is not sufficient. "Although tanks are still rumbling in Ukraine," the author notes, "their backyard has long been on fire." All of this makes people worried that "the country with a nuclear arsenal will collapse and the whole world will suffer."

Talk of Russia's inherent weaknesses naturally raises the question of what happens if Russia loses. This problem is at the core of the article "If Russia Fails, How Miserable Will It Be in the Future?"<sup>126</sup> If large countries suffer a defeat, the author maintains, "it will change the world pattern." But more troubling than the international ramifications will be the impact

on Russia's own standing. First, Russia will be "reduced to a third-rate country," losing the international status it used to enjoy. Second, Russia will disintegrate because the weak state can no longer hold together the "complex ethnic groups, many religions, and the largest land area." And third, Russia will be left "poor and miserable." Yet, even though Russia is described as standing on the brink of an "abyss" (深渊) just as the Soviet Union was in Afghanistan, and is "very unlikely to win" the current war in Ukraine, the author concludes on a fatalistic note: "Russia cannot fail. Even if it is difficult, it must persist and cannot compromise, otherwise the consequences will be dire."

Although the article itself is focused on Russia's domestic and international problems, commentators pay more attention to the question in its title – what if Russia fails? In the words of one commentator, "If Russia fails, do you think we will have a good life?" (emphasis added). This sparked a lively debate. Some more moderate commentators argue that "Russia's defeat would be more beneficial than harmful to the Chinese people" – hinting at the possibility that, if Russia loses, China should use the opportunity to retake the lands to its northeast (as discussed below) – while others claim that "If Russia collapses, the next country the US will deal with may be China," and others still think that "it doesn't matter." Some expand the benefits of Russia's loss to the entire globe: "The failure of the Big Goose is a good thing for mankind. It will be demilitarised, live in peace with humankind, and soon become rich." Some even consider it possible that "if Russia fails, NATO may be dissolved." If nothing else, this exchange of opinions exemplifies the lively debate on the Russia-Ukrainian war, on which Chinese society is divided. Whatever the outcome, one conclusion is drawn more explicitly than the rest: Russia can no longer be counted on as an ally, as we will see in the next section.

#### 4.1.2. ALLIANCE WITH RUSSIA QUESTIONED

Russia's weakness shows perhaps most directly in its inability to protect its allies. China has made a point not to ally itself formally with any country, but with the exception of North Korea, Russia is the closest thing to

<sup>125</sup> 送人头 (Song Rentou), 普京一旦卸任，俄罗斯未来10年，可能面临的五大难题... [Once Putin steps down, Russia may face five major problems in the next 10 years...], *Jinri Toutiao*, 3 August 2025 – accessed 5 August 2025.

<sup>126</sup> 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), 俄国如果失败了，未来会有多凄惨呢？ [If Russia fails, how miserable will the future be?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 12 February 2023 – accessed 6 August 2025.

an ally Beijing has ever had. Yet according to some netizens, China has little to gain from partnering with Russia.

*According to some netizens, China has little to gain from partnering with Russia*

Arguments vary. Some netizens maintain that it is not good to partner with Russia because of the potential damage to China's international reputation: "It is dangerous to be tied to a chariot together with Russia. China should choose to be friends with the vast majority of countries in the world. Russia's lesson is at hand."<sup>127</sup> Others claim that Russia has lost all worth as an ally, not only for China but for the rest of the world, too. "The funniest thing is that all kinds of 'allies' should run and turn their faces away [from Russia]," argues one article, listing the military and economic difficulties Russia faces as a result of its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>128</sup> This is a cautionary tale for all, the argument continues, because "when Armenia lost territory [to Azerbaijan], Russia didn't even bother to make a decent statement." The same goes for Russia's response to the situation in Syria, the author argues: "Syria collapsed in December last year, but all that Putin could pull off was an emotional facial expression." Some assert that, purely from the point of view of China's interests, Russia is not a valuable partner. Emphasising China's long-running policy of nonalignment, one author argues that China does not owe anything to any other country, including Russia (and Iran). This is true, the argument continues, even if China and Russia both have to deal with US hegemony. In fact, Russia should be grateful to China because Beijing has supported Russia in its fight against the west and turned the US's focus away from Russia.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [Zhang Yuanwei. If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>128</sup> 起起伏伏才完美 (Qiqi Fufu Cai Wanmei), [普京统治俄罗斯25年，他的铁腕是挡不住接下来的大变局的](#) [Putin has ruled Russia for 25 years, and his iron fist cannot stop the next big changes], *Jinri Toutiao*, 18 July 2025 – accessed 19 July 2025.

<sup>129</sup> 静夜史 (Jing Ye Shi), [俄国恩情报不尽，伊朗人情还不完？中国欠俄罗斯和伊朗多少人情？](#) [Can we ever pay Russia's kindness, can we ever pay Iran's kindness? How much does China owe to Russia and Iran?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 21 July 2025 – accessed 21 July 2025.

Even authors who support Russia's fight against the west and otherwise mirror its narratives closely admit reluctantly that Moscow's support for its allies has dwindled. "Reality dealt Russia a heavy blow" when it could not defend Armenia against Azerbaijan.<sup>130</sup> The author worryingly refers to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement: "Russia is now fighting the whole west alone. We have no allies on the battlefield and must rely on ourselves." Although these words were meant to rebuke Belarus, the lessons for China are evident, the author claims. Russia is "unreliable" because it is facing multiple domestic and international crises, a military coup, and "the invisible dark web" of western agents. All this has transformed Russia into an undesirable partner, "a dangerous house that is about to collapse."

*Russia's military and economic struggles have seriously damaged its reputation*

Russia's military and economic struggles have seriously damaged its reputation, causing some netizens to note that "through this war, the true strength of Russia has been exposed. It is not a tiger but a cat," and "If Russia can't even win against Ukraine, then it's not Russia."<sup>131</sup> Some even regard Russia as having "no independent agency" (被动) because it is unable to withstand Ukraine's drone strikes.<sup>132</sup> What these depictions explicitly or implicitly assert is that Russia is nothing like China, undermining the analogy narrative discussed in Chapter 1 and countering the emotional resonance it tries to engender.

<sup>130</sup> 领导力智库 (Lingdao Zhiku), [俄罗斯危险！国运一战！](#) [Russia is in danger! A decisive battle for the nation's destiny!], *Jinri Toutiao*, 5 August 2025 – accessed 5 August 2025.

<sup>131</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 09 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>132</sup> 烽火线 (Fenghuo Xian), [俄罗斯还是心大，克里米亚再次遭袭，基辅：摧毁多架俄军战斗机](#) [Russia is still big-hearted, Crimea is attacked again, Kyiv: destroys many Russian fighters], *Jinri Toutiao*, 5 August 2025 – accessed 6 August 2025.

## 4.2. HISTORY MATTERS

In the Introduction, I quoted a comment saying, “If Russia is defeated, we will seize the occasion to take back the land occupied by it in Siberia.”<sup>133</sup> This comment is emblematic of the narrative we now turn to. While the pragmatic voices among the Chinese commentators argue in favour of putting territorial disputes to one side for the time being, as discussed above, hawkish elements are determined to

### *Hawkish elements are determined to antagonise Russia over lands lost in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

antagonise Russia over lands lost in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This position is an almost natural outgrowth of the previous narrative of Russia’s inherent weakness, and regards Russia’s potential defeat in Ukraine as fortunate and beneficial for China: “A backward, dilapidated, and poor Russia is in our interests.”<sup>134</sup> Based on these hopes, some believe that it is only a matter of time before China can take back its “rightful” possessions in the Far East. Russia may not be weak enough yet, but its situation is deteriorating: “A declining Russia is in line with China’s long-term interests.”<sup>135</sup>

To substantiate the morality of this claim, Chinese netizens make three different but interrelated assertions: (1) that Russia and Russians are greedy and expansionist by nature; (2) that Russia has violated previous agreements with China and is therefore untrustworthy; (3) that Russia is no better than China’s other historical enemies, including Japan. All three narratives build on ample historical evidence and take their emotional cues from the narratives of China’s

<sup>133</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\)](#), [俄国如果失败了，未来会有多凄惨呢？](#) [If Russia fails, how miserable will the future be?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 12 February 2023 – accessed 6 August 2025.

<sup>134</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后 \(Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou\)](#), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>135</sup> Comment to [江湖小晓生 \(Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng\)](#), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

official history. This is where the conflict between Chinese nationalistic sentiments and geopolitical interests is most evident.

### 4.2.1. GREEDY AND EXPANSIONIST NATURE

Since Hong Kong and Macao were given back to the PRC (in 1997 and 1999, respectively), Russia has been the only former colonial power that still holds on to its territorial conquests in China, primarily in Outer Manchuria. This fact has not gone unnoticed in China, generating animosity and a particular reading of the Russian character. One author explains:

Tsarist Russia chose a unique expansion path – to use iron hooves to step on Siberia [永铁蹄踏平西伯利亚]. [...] Because of this difference, Russia’s colonial history in East Asia is more lasting and bloody than that of other powers. [...] After the end of World War II, the British and French colonies in East Asia fell one after another like dominoes, but Russia has always firmly held the territory of the Far East.<sup>136</sup>

Crucially, the article explains what sets Russia apart: “Behind this is the unique colonial code [殖民密码] of the Russians.” This statement makes readers think of Russians as aggressive and expansionist by birth, determined by their DNA to plunder and occupy, just like the authors who blamed Russia’s economic predicament on their “congenital defects.”

In addition to expansionism, the Russian character is believed to be aggressive, greedy, chauvinistic, and unfaithful – not too different from how Russians were seen by the Chinese public back in the 1910s.<sup>137</sup> The wrongdoings of the Tsarist regime are not limited only to territorial encroachments, as one commentator duly attests: “Tsarist Russia forced the Qing government to sign 1 182 unequal treaties, stole gold and silver, precious calligraphy and paintings, and jade,

<sup>136</sup> [随性自由的花猫 \(Suixing Ziyou De Huamao\)](#), [俄国：二战后唯一扎根东亚的欧洲强国？](#) [Russia: The only European power rooted in East Asia after World War II?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 20 July 2025 – accessed 20 July 2025.

<sup>137</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 185–186.

and burned and looted!”<sup>138</sup> We know from other sources that 27.6% of Chinese people think that the Russians are greedy.<sup>139</sup> And like other traits, greed is also seen by some as an essential component of the Russian character. According to one author:

Greed is engraved in Russia’s bones. Through-out modern history, they have been particularly keen on expanding their territory, and a large area of their territory has been taken from China by force.<sup>140</sup>

### The Russian invasion of Ukraine is also occasionally interpreted as the result of greed

Greed was deemed to be endemic also to the Soviet Union, demonstrating that some characteristics attributed to Russia and its people span generations.<sup>141</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine is also occasionally interpreted as the result of greed. One commentator compares Russian aggression towards Ukraine to a feeding frenzy: “The Big Goose swallowed four pieces of fat, and it will take him eight or ten years to hold on to them.”<sup>142</sup> In this metaphor, the Big Goose is Russia – sometimes also referred to as the Northern Goose (北鹅) – and the four pieces of fat denote the four large Ukrainian oblasts that Russian forces have occupied.

To some, greed is also to blame for Russian economic and military miseries. This opinion is particularly interesting because it diverts

blame away from the west. Although some continue to dispute whether Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a demonstration of its greed – blaming instead the west for laying a trap or forcing Russia to defend itself (as discussed above) – others are adamant that the west cannot be blamed, noting that “greedy people are easily fooled.”<sup>143</sup> The latter comment refers to the notion that the western powers undermined Russian interests by laying a trap that the greedy Russians could not help but walk into. One commentator in the same thread questions Russia’s rationale for occupying new lands: “It is already the biggest country. What more does it need?,” suggesting that greed is the only explanation for Russia’s incursion into Ukraine. “They [Russians] are greedy and want to die,” another commentator remarks.<sup>144</sup>

One author uses the term “torrent [洪流] of Slavic expansion” to explain Russia’s occupation of Siberia in the 19th century, painting Russia as an inevitable and destructive force of nature.<sup>145</sup> It emphasises the ethnic component of Russia’s invasion of the East. There was a time when the Tsarist regime was determined to turn much of Manchuria into a “Yellow Russia,” with a heavy ethnically Russian presence.<sup>146</sup> This historical legacy has caused Russia to be associated with ethnic expansion and ethnic cleansing. “They do not engage in economic plunder like Britain and France, but directly carry out population replacement,” noted the same author who wrote about Russians’ “unique colonial code,” going on to describe some of the ethnic policies of the Tsarist Russia and Soviet Union that caused the aborigines of the northeast to be purged or flee into Heilongjiang. It is

<sup>138</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

<sup>139</sup> Vasileva, et al., “The Image of Russians in the Eyes of the Chinese,” cited in Sorokina et al., “Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth,” 148.

<sup>140</sup> 飞鱼说史 (Feiyu Shuoshi), [1867年，俄国沙皇出价700万贱卖阿拉斯加州，美国人却不愿意买](#) [In 1867, the Russian Tsar bid 7 million yuan to sell Alaska cheaply, but the Americans were reluctant to buy it], *Jinri Toutiao*, 15 July 2025 – accessed 16 July 2025.

<sup>141</sup> 简单糯米uYy1ikt (Jiandan Nuomi uYy1ikt), [苏联14个加盟共和国，是怎么并入俄国领土的？芬兰成了苏联的遗憾](#) [How did the 14 constituent republics of the Soviet Union be merged into Russian territory? Finland became the regret of the Soviet Union], *Jinri Toutiao*, 16 July 2025 – accessed 16 July 2025.

<sup>142</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>143</sup> Comment to 飞鱼说史 (Feiyu Shuoshi), [1867年，俄国沙皇出价700万贱卖阿拉斯加州，美国人却不愿意买](#) [In 1867, the Russian Tsar bid 7 million yuan to sell Alaska cheaply, but the Americans were reluctant to buy it], *Jinri Toutiao*, 15 July 2025 – accessed 16 July 2025.

<sup>144</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 07 August 2025.

<sup>145</sup> 极速饺子5 (Jisu Jiaozi 5), [俄国60年拿下1200万km²的西伯利亚，中原王朝为何做不到](#) [Russia captured 12 million km<sup>2</sup> of Siberia in 60 years, why couldn’t the Central Plains Dynasty do it?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 20 July 2025 – accessed 21 July 2025.

<sup>146</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 153–174.

because of these policies that “the land was turned into the ‘core domain of the Russian clan’ [俄族基本道].” Although the author admits that “it would be difficult to get the land back from Moscow’s control,” they, nevertheless, end on a hopeful note: “I don’t know how long Moscow can keep up this obsession with ‘conquering the East’” – a reference to Vladivostok’s toponym – “perhaps at some point in the future, this frozen land will rewrite its fate in an unexpected way.”

Ethnic cleansing carried out in the wake of Russian expansion into the Far East appears to be part of Russia’s colonial image. It was not beyond the Russians to “hollow out the area, [and] take some girls away,” notes one author.<sup>147</sup> Russians are portrayed as infringing on the rights and livelihoods of the East Siberian minorities. Although the vast expanses of Siberia were only sporadically inhabited, “The Russian army [...] invaded the Heilongjiang [Amur] River Basin, causing indelible damage to the Ewenki, Oroqen, Xibe, and other ethnic minorities in China.”<sup>148</sup> This statement makes it seem that the CCP and its historical predecessors have always respected the indigenous people of Siberia – a claim that is blatantly untrue – and that these ethnic groups were part of China back then.<sup>149</sup> What

*Russia’s image as a violator of ethnic rights makes it seem different from China, again countering the analogy narrative where the two states are portrayed in tandem*

concerns us most, however, is that Russia’s image as a violator of ethnic rights makes it seem different from China, again countering the analogy narrative where the two states are portrayed in tandem.

<sup>147</sup> 极速饺子5 (Jisu Jiaozi 5), [俄国60年拿下1200万km<sup>2</sup>的西伯利亚·中原王朝为何做不到](#) [Russia captured 12 million km<sup>2</sup> of Siberia in 60 years, why couldn’t the Central Plains Dynasty do it?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 20 July 2025 – accessed 21 July 2025.

<sup>148</sup> 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约·苏联修改加拉罕宣言·边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>149</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 71.

One curious analysis uses Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to criticise Russia. According to the author, Marx and Engels write that Russia is “a hegemonic country [霸权国家] in its bones” with “aggressive ambitions.”<sup>150</sup> Continuing with the Marx and Engels references, the author notes that “its [Russia’s] tactics, its methods may change, but the gist of this policy – world hegemony – will not change.” To all this, the author adds his own conclusions: “It can be seen that Marx unceremoniously used words such as ‘aggression’, ‘plunder’, ‘dictatorship’ and ‘chauvinism’ to describe Russia’s expansion, directly exposing it to be evil and tyrannical.” Although, as pointed out above, Marx did not actually assign ethnic groups with essentialist characteristics, these words carry a lot of weight because Marx is still held in high regard in China.

Russia is also seen as arrogant. In the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war, argues one commentator, “Russia’s understanding of the world has diminished! [They are] arrogant and self-righteous!”<sup>151</sup> This trait is also seen as innate in the Russians. One article notes that “after rounds of expansion, Russia has [...] become an arrogant country. The root of this arrogance is both in historical tradition and national character.”<sup>152</sup> The same article goes on to allege that “the arrogance buried deep in the blood, as well as the sense of crisis in reality, made Russia once again embark on the road of tough confrontation with the West. Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine, all this has become inevitable!” Despite bringing out several similarities between Russia and China (including the need for a strong leader and Russia’s Asian character), this article has been unavailable since March 2024, presumably due to its critical stance. The article “If Russia Hadn’t Sold Alaska to the US, How Big Would Russia Be?”

<sup>150</sup> 小妙说 (Xiao Chao Shuo), [马克思是如何评价俄国的？答案让你惊讶](#) [How did Marx evaluate Russia? The answer will surprise you], *Jinri Toutiao*, 09 June 2021 – accessed 22 August 2025.

<sup>151</sup> Comment to [历史真相背后](#) (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>152</sup> [“The history of Russia’s breaking and Slavic glory. Russia, which has been rejected by the West, is still proud.”](#), *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 October 2021 – no longer accessible.

has also been removed.<sup>153</sup> It was somewhat critical of Russia, but the comments attached were much more unfavourable. They ranged from a simple “an overly strong Russia is not a good thing” and “the earth-eating Tsarist Russia is too large; not a good thing,” to “Russia and the old hairy ones [老毛子, i.e., Russians] will always be the biggest threats to China!” and “What the motherland and the people of the world need is a half-dead Russia.” The article also claimed many Russian territories should rightfully belong to China.

#### 4.2.2. VIOLATOR OF TREATIES AND THE “MIGHT IS RIGHT” ARGUMENT

Since 2004, Russia and China have had no conflict over their shared border. After the end of the Cold War, Beijing had no other choice but to settle its border disputes with Russia through peaceful negotiations in order to avoid facing enemies on two fronts.<sup>154</sup> It was in this spirit that the two sides signed a boundary agreement in May 1991, months before the Soviet Union fell, solving most of their territorial disputes. Ten years on, in 2001, the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation was signed, followed by a border agreement in 2004 (Complementary Agreement Between China and Russia on the Eastern Section of the China–Russia Boundary), which was ratified by both sides in 2005 and came into effect in late 2008.<sup>155</sup> To the Chinese public, however, this does not mean that the matter is finished or forgotten. Despite the official ratification of the latest deal, it was heavily criticised on both sides of the border.<sup>156</sup> Chinese schoolchildren learn from history textbooks that still have maps showing some parts of the Russian Federation as belonging to the Yuan (1271–1368) or

<sup>153</sup> “If Russia hadn’t sold Alaska to the US, how big would Russia be?” *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 December 2021 – no longer accessible.

<sup>154</sup> Lei Yu, “Settling the Sino–Russian Border Issue: Land in Exchange for a Strategic Partnership?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (2020).

<sup>155</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, *Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 2001).

<sup>156</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Morris Low, Leonid Petrov, and Timothy Y. Tsu, *East Asia Beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of Violence* (Routledge, 2015), 32–33.

Qing (1644–1911) states, and are taught that the “evil Russians” stole over 1.5 mn square kilometres of their sacred land.<sup>157</sup> This continues to stoke animosity towards Russia and strains the emotional resonance between the two societies.

### *Part of the criticism of Russia is that it has violated multiple treaties signed with China*

Part of the criticism of Russia is that it has violated multiple treaties signed with China. Because this has happened with alleged pathological consistency, some Chinese people conclude that Russia cannot be trusted. “According to history, Russians are the least reliable people,” notes one netizen.<sup>158</sup> This is followed by multiple comments such as:

All these treaties can only prove that the Slavs are untrustworthy [无信] and without integrity [无义], and any treaty signed with them must be based on strength! It also proves that the treaties signed with the Slavs are not binding. If you are entangled in such treaties, you only bind your own hands and feet, benefiting others.<sup>159</sup>

Other voices chime in: “There is no word for ‘honesty’ [诚信] in the Russian dictionary! After reading various Russian folk stories and fables, I found that there were almost no characters who praised honesty and trustworthiness.”<sup>160</sup> To this comment, there is a reply: “Right! The Russian nation is called a fighting nation.” This gives a sense that, in the eyes of some Chinese, Russia’s militaristic or fighting spirit is not always seen as a positive, and may also be perceived as a dialectical opposite to honesty

<sup>157</sup> Callahan, “Chinese global orders,” 13.

<sup>158</sup> 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>159</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

<sup>160</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

and trustworthiness, virtues highly praised in Confucian philosophy.<sup>161</sup>

We saw earlier that the perception of Russia's value as an ally has been seriously tarnished by the past crisis. This argument makes all agreements with Russia unthinkable. Ever since the very first Sino-Russian treaty (the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk) was broken in 1858, the Russians have regularly infringed upon China's territorial integrity and pushed the border closer and closer to China's heartland. (Ironically, the Russians themselves held that the Treaty of Nerchinsk was signed under duress and is therefore unfair.)<sup>162</sup> This historical belief has made Russia seem not only malevolent and untrustworthy, but dangerous. Although it has been a long time since Russia's expansion into the Far East, the historical legacy and its current war against Ukraine continue to sow fear among the Chinese public. One day, it is believed, Moscow may again turn eastwards and desire to occupy all of China. It is well known to the Chinese netizens that "Putin has said that Russia has no borders!"<sup>163</sup> Some even compare Russia to a "polar bear that has always coveted China."<sup>164</sup> This fear is not wholly without historical rationale. There was talk among the Russian intelligentsia of conquering China as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, an aspiration that looked increasingly realistic to the war hawks of St Petersburg in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>165</sup>

One of the most aggressive impressions of Russia's territorial expansion is attached to the article "Russia Covers an Area of More Than 17 Million Square Kilometres. Why Does It Need to Seize More Land? The Black Sea is Different,"

<sup>161</sup> Cecilia Wee, "'Xin', Trust, and Confucius' Ethics," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (2011).

<sup>162</sup> Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: Russia's New Nationalism* (Yale University Press, 2022), 37.

<sup>163</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

<sup>164</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>165</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 84, 153–174.

by Jianghu Xiao Xiaosheng.<sup>166</sup> Fear for Russia's incursion into China is best exemplified by a map that shows Russia's expansion into China (as well as Finland, the Baltic states, Central Europe, and large parts of Central Asia). The origin of this map is obscure, but from the fact that the capital of the depicted Russian state is in St Petersburg, one can discern that it represents the expansionist plans of Tsarist Russia. Its historical backdrop notwithstanding, the context it is situated in gives the map contemporary relevance. The intention of the map is to raise Chinese concern and anxiety, if not fear, of Russia. To prove his point, the author describes several historical instances of Russia attacking or demeaning China. The Russians do not like the East, but in the current situation, they have no other choice but to interact with China, he asserts. Yet, he concludes, "In the minds of the vast majority of Russians, they have always positioned themselves as a European country." This is the rationale behind Moscow's expansion into Ukraine and the west: "Only by occupying the territory of Europe and continuing to develop its western domains can this be proven." The eastern provinces, however, are abandoned and forgotten, for "the East is actually just a colony."

Continuing with the same line of thought, another article alleges that Russia is an opportunistic power, always ready to expand its territory when possible.<sup>167</sup> The Tsarist regime turned its gaze towards the East, it is argued, only after realising that its way westwards was blocked after losing the Crimean War in 1856. But expansion eastwards remained possible, and Russia threatened to bring war upon the Qing. Conflict was only avoided because Beijing gave in and agreed to sign the Treaty of Aigun two years later. Even though multiple treaties had precisely demarcated the Sino-Russian border, Russia "blatantly tore them apart" and marched to

<sup>166</sup> 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [俄国坐拥1700多万平方公里，为何还要夺取更多土地？黑海可不一样](#) [Russia covers an area of more than 17 million square kilometres. Why does it need to seize more land? The Black Sea is different], *Jinri Toutiao*, 21 July 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>167</sup> 爱思考布莱兹613X (Ai Sikao Bulaize 613X), [沙俄占了中亚400万平方公里，为何苏联解体时，俄罗斯选择放弃](#) [Tsarist Russia occupied 4 million square kilometres in Central Asia. Why did Russia choose to give up when the Soviet Union collapsed?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 18 July 2025 – accessed 18 July 2025.

occupy “one million square kilometres in the northeast” as soon as it had the advantage. The author describes the process as “扩张陀螺,” which means “expansionist gyroscope,” giving Russia’s colonial expansion an unstoppable and uncontrollable air. According to the article, Russia is “cruel or ruthless” (狠), “addicted to the land” (地皮热恋), and even though it “enjoys” the world’s largest territory, there are “actually countless instances of fraud hidden behind it.”

An almost natural implication of this traitorous behaviour is, some netizens suggest, that Russians do not listen to reason. “They only worship strength,” argues one author, “all treaties signed by China and Russia in the past or in the future speak of a temporary balance of power. Russian culture holds that only the weak will respect the treaty, and the strong will make treaties.”<sup>168</sup> Such statements reveal that the validity of international relations has been undermined in the eyes of some Chinese people. History has made it clear to them that only raw strength can guarantee China’s prosperity and territorial integrity. This belief is well exemplified in the following two comments: “The treaty is something on paper, and strength is something in the hand,” and “Treaties have never been reliable; only with strength can one decide everything.”

The “might is right” reasoning justifies actions or authority purely on the basis of power or strength, which Russia used to have. But now, Chinese netizens believe, the tables are turned; it is time for revenge. The Chinese have been waiting for this moment, biding their time to seize back territories lost to Russia over the centuries ago.<sup>169</sup> The first chance to do this came when the Tsarist regime collapsed in 1917, but this was wasted because the young Republic of China (founded in 1912) had quickly lost its cohesion and therefore its capacity to fight a foreign war. (At the same time, Russia’s image in China suffered a particularly heavy

<sup>168</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

<sup>169</sup> Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: Russia’s New Nationalism* (Yale University Press, 2022), 28.

blow as thousands of refugees flooded across the border into the newly founded Republic of China. These “leftover subjects of a once-mighty empire,” as Philip Snow dubs them, had no jobs or means of sustenance and were often forced into prostitution or beggary.<sup>170</sup> The Cold War years were not conducive to China’s cause either. But now that China is regaining its economic foothold and political determination, there are growing calls that “the unequal treaties signed with the Soviet Union and Russia must be abolished.”<sup>171</sup> It is perhaps noteworthy in this context that Russia is also perceived negatively across the border, particularly in Russian towns with large Chinese populations.<sup>172</sup>

Jianghu Xiao Xiaosheng, whose article includes the map of Russia taking over half of Eurasia, thinks that the lesson China must draw from these historical encounters is clear:

I can affirm that I will definitely tear up the treaty [signed with Russia] in the future. [...] Why is it that they [Russians] can hit us when we are down and tear up the treaty, but when they are weak, they strictly require us to abide by the treaty and treat people with integrity? Why is there such a double standard?

Reactions to his article are equally bitter. Many commentators argue that if Russia can tear up the Treaty of Nerchinsk, then the other treaties signed between Russia and China can be tossed aside as well: “They can tear it up, why can’t we!” One author provides a list of different treaty violations by Russia, and then notes: “Make full use of your own advantages and create the greatest benefits for your country. Although it disgusts us, it guarantees their interests. It’s time to learn.”<sup>173</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 201.

<sup>171</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

<sup>172</sup> Kapitolina Fedorova, “[Speaking With and About Chinese](#),” *Civilisations*, Vol. 62 (2013), 71–90.

<sup>173</sup> 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [中俄划定西北边界：签订《勘分西北界约记》后，还有哪3个子条约](#) [China and Russia demarcated the northwest border: What are the three sub-treaties after signing the Treaty on the Survey of the Northwest Boundary?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 22 July 2023 – accessed 25 September 2025.

Whatever the legal consequences, it is clear to some that “Russia is not trustworthy” and “Russia will never be a friend of China.” “Don’t forget the national shame” sounds like a mantra throughout the comments section. Others are more militant and call for outright repatriation of China’s former territories: “Tsarist Russia must retreat west of the Ural Mountains, at least west of the Lena River, otherwise China and Russia cannot have friendship [enraged red face emoji].” Another commentator adds:

*The consensus among the commentators is that it’s only a matter of time before China takes its historical possessions back*

“West of the Yenisei River.” The consensus among the commentators is that it’s only a matter of time before China takes its historical possessions back. Some may want to wait: “Just wait until we are strong”; “The time is not ripe yet [three grinning face emojis].” Others advocate for immediate action: “How much Siberia can be sold for?”; “Take back all lost territories!”

#### 4.2.3. RUSSIA NO BETTER THAN THE REST

Russia has held a special position in China’s foreign relations. Even during the high point of colonial expansion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia was able to manoeuvre in the corridors of power in Beijing to make itself seem the least of all evils.<sup>174</sup> During the first decades of the Cold War, the PRC received a lot of support from Moscow – efforts that attracted Chinese goodwill back then and are still remembered today.<sup>175</sup> And since the start of this century, the two powers have cultivated a close partnership that is reflected in Russia’s positive image among the Chinese public. It is, therefore, curious that some netizens consider Russia to be among the worst of China’s historical and contemporary adversaries. Some even go so far as to lump Russia in with the rest of the west against China: “The problem is that Russia secretly colludes with the US to

stab China.”<sup>176</sup> Others refer to history to make their point: “The west wants money, Russia and Japan want our land and lives, so we must beware of villains.”<sup>177</sup> Another commentator offers a fatalistic explanation for this: “History just is like this.”

Comparing Russia to Japan is especially damning because Japan is the quintessential nemesis in Chinese historical memory, widely criticised and even attacked by ultranationalist elements.<sup>178</sup> “China’s strong rivals are Russia and Japan, and these two wolves are ambitious,” writes one commenter, leading others to declare that “A decaying Russia is in the interests of the whole world!” and “A

weak Russia is very necessary.”<sup>179</sup> In one list of countries that have hurt China the most, Russia is number one, followed by Japan. “The Japanese killed the most Chinese people, but Russia occupied the most Chinese land,” writes one commentator, to which another replies, “Russia will never be a friend of China.”<sup>180</sup> A fellow commentator has the answer, evoking a sense of pragmatism that is so characteristic of the Chinese perception of Russia: “Everyone understands this, but it [this attitude] is based on the consideration of current interests.”

In this section, we again encountered the essentialist portrayal of Russian character, only this time the traits attributed to the Russian state or its inhabitants are negative. Russia is seen as greedy, arrogant, and utterly

<sup>176</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>177</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>178</sup> James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China’s Japan Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>179</sup> 以史为镜的背后 (Yishi Weijing Beihou), [俄罗斯崛起有多快，看其历史就知道了，每隔一段时间就会崛起](#) [How fast is Russia’s rise can be seen from its history, and it will rise every once in a while], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 October 2021 – accessed 19 May 2025.

<sup>180</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), [沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信](#) [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>174</sup> Snow, *China and Russia*, 126–153

<sup>175</sup> Senina et al., “[Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today](#),” 16.

untrustworthy. Therefore, Russians' overall positive image – as mentioned earlier, close to 70–80% of Chinese people see Russia positively – does not prevent a quarter of the society (27.6%) from assigning negative traits to their northern neighbours.<sup>181</sup> It goes without saying that such portrayals are detrimental to the emotional resonance built up by Russia's image-building efforts. Sometimes, Russia is placed under the same emotional umbrella as the rest of China's historical and contemporary rivals. The highest condemnation is to equate Russia with Japan. Many netizens express confusion as to why Russia is considered a friend by their compatriots in the first place: "Russians are not friends of the Chinese; they are all about their own interests. I don't know why so many Chinese people still fail to recognise this."<sup>182</sup>

These considerations have made it clear to some that war (or some other violent act) is necessary to retake China's "lost territories." But it is difficult to say how popular such calls actually are. The Russian and Chinese economies are increasingly interlinked, and many livelihoods depend on the continued flow of goods across the border. Such cautionary voices seem to be missing from the above discussions. Also infrequent are expressions of caution, fear of war, and worries about the potential loss of close kin. "I don't want my children to go to the northeast to squat in the trenches," is a rare example.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>181</sup>Vasileva et al., "The Image of Russians in the Eyes of the Chinese," cited in Sorokina et al., "Russia and China as Viewed by Russian and Chinese Youth," 148.

<sup>182</sup>Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), 沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信 [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 31 July 2025.

<sup>183</sup>Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), 俄国如果失败了，未来会有多凄惨呢？ [If Russia fails, how miserable will the future be?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 12 February 2023 – accessed 6 August 2025.

## 5. ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES AND OMISSIONS

The *Jinri Toutiao* articles analysed for this report are full of strong and clear opinions about Russia and its war in Ukraine. Not everyone is of the same mind, however, splitting Chinese society into opposing camps, with some defending Russia's actions and others sharply criticising them. This reflects a broader tension in Chinese public opinion. But the picture of Russia's image among the Chinese netizens is only partly finished if we don't consider the opinions and narratives of those who are hesitant about Russia (and the outcome of the war) or who try to make an altogether different point (e.g., referring to Russia but actually talking about China). Most of all, we should also look at what is missing: the opinions that should, in all likelihood, be present among the Chinese but are not.

### 5.1. HESITATION AND CONFUSION

Some netizens admit that they have difficulty taking sides, unable to decide whether they should support Russia, oppose it, or simply express their ambivalence on which way the conflict will go. For instance, one commenter notes, "Looking at the current situation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we don't know whether Russia is a blessing or a curse."<sup>184</sup> Other commentators in the same thread concur: "Russia and Europe, it's too early to say who will kill whom! Of course, Americans make a fortune." Some think that Russia itself faces a difficult choice: "Today's Russia finds itself in a difficult situation, in a dilemma. Winning or losing is unpredictable, [it is] outnumbered, and the long-term battle is disadvantageous!"<sup>185</sup> One commentator even notes that "fools know" whether Russia is doing well or not. Some netizens portray Russia

<sup>184</sup>Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了 [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>185</sup>Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), 俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了 [Russia only now knows that "it was fooled." Unfortunately, it's too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

as being caught in the whirlwind of history and politics, with little agency or opportunity to determine its own destiny: “The fate of Europe, Russia’s choice, and the abacus of the US – no matter how you stir it, it will become a pot of porridge that is difficult to sort out.”

*People who deal with confusion-induced discomfort by disengaging do not leave comments, let alone write articles about it*

Opinions voicing hesitation or confusion are not widely represented in the *Jinri Toutiao*. But this does not necessarily mean that they are rare. People who deal with confusion-induced discomfort by disengaging do not leave comments, let alone write articles about it.<sup>186</sup> However, this does not mean that such people do not exist.

## 5.2. WESTERN NARRATIVES

As is evident from the example above, negative depictions of Russia do not usually mean that Chinese netizens have accepted western narratives on Russia or its war against Ukraine. Quite the contrary. Western

*Negative depictions of Russia do not usually mean that Chinese netizens have accepted western narratives on Russia or its war against Ukraine*

narratives are rare, and western interests are barely mentioned. This is natural, of course, given that the Chinese media sphere is strictly controlled and many western media outlets

<sup>186</sup> Leon Festinger proved back in the 1950s that cognitive dissonance produces psychological discomfort.

Confusion can be triggered by a piece of discordant information or when new information clashes with an internalised goal, obligation, or sense of responsibility. Because experiencing confusion is unpleasant, we tend to either seek clarification and impose meaning on the situation or withdraw and disengage. One may presume – although further research would be needed to confirm this hypothesis – that many of the strong opinions discussed above are the result of an effort to make sense of an otherwise disturbing piece of information. But if cognitive dissonance is solved by disengaging from the subject, the decision leaves no traceable mark. See: Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957), 3; Leon Festinger, *Conflict, Decision, and Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1964).

are restricted.<sup>187</sup> Still, there remain a few exceptions.

Occasionally, Chinese netizens reference western sources directly. For example, the article “Putin Has Ruled Russia for 25 Years, and His Iron Fist Cannot Stop the Next Big Changes” – which I have quoted several times already – builds on a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, “The Limits of Putin’s Balancing Act” by Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman.<sup>188</sup>

The author does not hide the original source of his article but openly demonstrates it by adding a screenshot of the original article’s title as it stands in the original outlet, as if wanting to proudly demonstrate where the information has come from.

Few commentators seem to comprehend the western viewpoint on Russia and its war in Ukraine. For example, one comment reads: “At present, the possibility [of Russia losing] is very high. It is difficult for the international community to recognise Russia’s demands.”<sup>189</sup> Here, the author talks of the international community with apparent sympathy, as if regarding themselves as part of it. In another rare example, one commentator notes that “joining NATO is the freedom of others,” referring to Ukraine’s right to make its own alliances and to its need for expensive military assistance.<sup>190</sup> But references to such recognisably western narratives are indeed rare. More importantly, we can conclude that the critical opinions of Russia are to a significant extent homegrown. These

<sup>187</sup> Emily Quan, “Censorship sensing: The capabilities and implications of China’s Great Firewall under Xi Jinping,” *Sigma: Journal of Political and International Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2022).

<sup>188</sup> 起起伏伏才完美 (Qiqi Fufu Cai Wanmei), [普京统治俄罗斯25年，他的铁腕是挡不住接下来的大变局的](#) [Putin has ruled Russia for 25 years, and his iron fist cannot stop the next big changes], *Jinri Toutiao*, 18 July 2025 – no longer accessible as of 22 August 2025; Michael Kimmage, Maria Lipman, [“The Limits of Putin’s Balancing Act: What the Kremlin Will Sacrifice in Pursuit of Victory in Ukraine,”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, 16 July 2025.

<sup>189</sup> Comment to 张元伟 (Zhang Yuanwei), [俄国在战争中，如果一旦失败，中国或将面临许多风险](#) [If Russia loses the war, China may face many risks], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 March 2022 – accessed 20 March 2025.

<sup>190</sup> Comment to 历史真相背后 (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), [俄国现在才知道“上当了”，可惜已经晚了](#) [Russia only now knows that “it was fooled.” Unfortunately, it’s too late], *Jinri Toutiao*, 14 February 2022 – accessed 7 August 2025.

opinions are mostly built on indigenous narratives (vernacular memories, literature, personal contacts, etc.) that do not require outside support.

### *Critical opinions of Russia are, to a significant extent, homegrown*

It is also not beyond some Chinese netizens to make up or misquote western sources in their analyses. For instance, one article titled “French Military Expert: ‘If the War Between Russia and Ukraine Continues, Russia Will No Longer Exist’” builds on an alleged 2023 assessment by a French military expert called *Moliniweng* (莫里尼翁, Chinese transliteration of Sauvignon, French grape). Even though there is no shortage of predictions of Russia’s doom since the first days of the full-on invasion of Ukraine in 2022, I was unable to verify this particular expert source (the original article was published at Sohu.com).<sup>191</sup> Be that as it may, it seems that western sources are sometimes used to lend credibility to the argument that Russia is losing this fight.

### *Western sources are sometimes used to lend credibility to the argument that Russia is losing this fight*

A more elaborate depiction of a western viewpoint is discussed in a Sohu.com article titled “Russian Textbooks Delete Content on Encroachment on Chinese territory, Estonian Prime Minister: ‘Russians Must be Transformed’.”<sup>192</sup> Published in September 2025, the article looks back on then Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas’ remarks on Russia’s political history and ties it with China’s historical grievances against the country. The article is relatively balanced. It points out that the push to change the content of Russia’s history textbooks to make them less reflective of Russia’s colonial aggression against China came from grassroots activists from the Far

<sup>191</sup> 法国军事专家：“俄乌战争继续打下去，俄国将不复存在” [French military expert: “If the Russia-Ukraine war continues, Russia will no longer exist”], *Sohu.com*, 14 July 2025 – accessed 19 July 2025.

<sup>192</sup> 河南省 (Henan Sheng). 俄罗斯教材删侵占中国领土内容，爱沙尼亚总理：必须改造俄罗斯人 [Russian textbooks delete the content of encroachment on Chinese territory, Estonian Prime Minister: Russians must be transformed], *Sohu*, 17 September 2025 – accessed 26 September 2025.

East, but was supported by politicians and academics:

Some residents in the Far East were dissatisfied with the original textbooks. They felt that the book claimed that Russia seized territory from China by force, which is uncomfortable to digest. Especially in Amur Oblast, some people directly protested and demanded that those descriptions be changed. [...] The new version of the book diluted those historical details.

“The purpose of modifying the textbook is obvious,” the author continues, “It is to unify the historical narrative, avoid internal discord, and strengthen the sense of national identity.”

This change notwithstanding, the article is quick to add that “Russia took a total of about 1.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of land from China” by forcing upon the Qing state multiple “unequal treaties.” Reflecting the dissonance between China’s historical grievances against Russia and its strategic calculations that build on Russia’s continued cooperation, the article notes that Putin admitted in a 2018 interview that the matter of the Far East is not settled. He said: “The Chinese people have not forgotten the Far East. [...] The Chinese people may want to return to the region. [...] Future generations will solve this problem.” Chinese officials, apparently, did not react, “perhaps because they did not want to disrupt Sino-Russian relations at that time.” Note that the article insinuates that a reaction from Beijing is not out of the question in the future.

Kallas’ comments are presented in this muddled context. First, the article notes that Kallas has called for changes in Russia’s history curriculum, taking Germany as an example, where the Nuremberg Trials “changed their [German] mentality through re-education.” This has not happened in Russia, and this is why, Kallas reportedly believes, the Russian people “are still stuck in the imperial thinking. [...] Russian history textbooks still follow the Soviet version, which misleads the younger generation.” To remedy this situation, the article maintains, Kallas has “suggested that NATO countries impose control over Moscow, promote the rewriting of history books, and change the thinking of Russians through propaganda and cultural activities.” This

anxiety-provoking remark notwithstanding, Kallas' take on Russia's political history seems to draw sympathy. In the new 2023 version of Russia's official historiography, the article attests, the matter of the Far East "is still diluted to avoid mentioning the details of encroachment." More to the point, the article notes that "this is in lie with Kallas' criticism. She feels that Russia is tampering with history to support nationalism." Although Kallas' various statements have provoked angry rebuffs from both Moscow and Beijing – including accusing her of "misreading of Sino-Russian cooperation" – the fact remains that the Far East continues to be occupied by Russia. "Internationally," the article notes, "this is regarded as historical revisionism."

Kallas' viewpoints on Russia's political history have been cleverly used to critique Moscow's official account on the history of the Far East, making it one of a few examples of western narratives being adopted to serve China's interests. Inadvertently, this has given some clout to Kallas' understanding of Russia's war in Ukraine as well. The reader is left with a sense that Russia's telling of history cannot be trusted – when its narration of colonialism against China is "diluted" and "revisionist," why should Russia's account of Ukraine and the west be any different? This parallel even draws an interesting comment that shows considerable knowledge about Estonia: "After Estonia's independence, [history] textbooks were rewritten to change the role of the Soviet Union from a liberator to occupier, emphasising suffering." Whichever way one looks at it, Russia is portrayed as aggressive, tampering with history to create collective amnesia or serve its current political interests. The comments on the article testify as much: "Of the five permanent members of the United Nations [Security Council], China is the only country that has not achieved unification. Why? Who is blocking it?," asks one commentator with a tinge of sarcasm. More tellingly, the same commentator asks: "Do you think it is easier to take back the Far East or Taiwan now?" At the risk of overinterpreting this remark, the commentator seems to be saying that repatriating lands to the north of the Sino-Russian border is easier than launching a successful attack on Taiwan. This is not the only example where the two territorial

claims are juxtaposed. A comment on another article notes: "After another two years, after the Taiwan issue is resolved, we should be able to talk about the territorial issue with Russia."<sup>193</sup> Although the temporal sequence is different, comparing the two eventualities once again speaks to the importance of a common historical context in which both grievances are embedded, carried by a political slogan that calls for "complete reunification of the motherland" (祖国完全统一). The commentators seem to be of the joint opinion that, as one of them notes, "It [Russia] should unconditionally return the great rivers and mountains of our country." Since Kallas' argument supports this view, it is no wonder that she, too, receives some applause: "Give praise to this upright Prime Minister of Estonia! Although she is not Chinese, she did what Chinese people 'can't' do!" The commentator refers to the fact that Kallas criticised Russia's official reading of history. More to the point, perhaps, this remark notes the curious configuration in which Estonia's (or the EU's) and China's interests are perceived to align.

### 5.3. RUSSIA AS A PROXY FOR CRITICISING THE CCP

Open criticism of the CCP is not possible in China. The Chinese populace has, therefore, adopted various inventive ways to circumvent this impediment, one of which is using Russia as a proxy. With its authoritarian similarities,

*With its authoritarian similarities, Russia and its historical predecessors offer an analogy that can be used to criticise the CCP and its policies from multiple angles*

Russia and its historical predecessors offer an analogy that can be used to criticise the CCP and its policies from multiple angles.

For example, the author I discussed earlier, who used Marx and Engels to make his case, explains that Marx was critical of Russia

<sup>193</sup> Comment to 江湖小晓生 (Jianghu Xiaoxiaosheng), 沙俄违背尼布楚条约，苏联修改加拉罕宣言，边境条约还有几分可信 [Tsarist Russia violated the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Soviet Union revised the Galakhan Declaration, and the border treaty is still some credibility], *Jinri Toutiao*, 23 January 2025 – accessed 22 July 2025.

because he “was a true liberal and idealist, and believed in freedom and equality all his life. He was naturally extremely unhappy with the military autocracy and brutal conquest of Tsarist Russia, and regarded it as a fortress of autocracy.”<sup>194</sup> Marx is still highly regarded in China, both among the elite as well as the public, and for this reason can be used as a shield against attack and censorship. In this case, the author calls Marx a “true liberal” who stood for freedom and equality, and was critical of autocracy. This statement can be read as a latent endorsement of liberal values (perhaps even including human rights). At the same time, it serves as an attack against autocracies of all stripes – even though this article is about imperial Russia and its autocratic regimes, it is obvious that Marx was critical of authoritarianism in principle, and that this criticism may also be extended to the CCP-led Chinese state apparatus.

It may be worth noting that this article originally had multiple comments which also criticised Russia for being authoritarian, stressing liberal values in particular. For example:

Marx also specifically mentioned the media and public opinion in Russia, believing that there was an expansive control of [free] speech, tending to instil Slavic nationalism and great-power chauvinism. The people were unable to express themselves, causing the whole of society to fall into the irrational frenzy of the Tsarist policy of aggression.

It is likely that this comment was meant as a proxy criticism of the CCP on two accounts. First, the netizen focuses specifically on media control and freedom of speech, then points out that nationalism and great-power chauvinism have led to an “irrational frenzy.” Both have parallels in China.

While the article itself was still accessible (as of 22 August 2025), the comment cited above had been removed. One can only guess why, but it stands to reason that this remark was recognised by censors as a proxy critique of the authoritarian practices of the CCP. Beijing is, of course, highly sensitive about comparisons

<sup>194</sup> 小炒说 (Xiao Chao Shuo), [马克思是如何评价俄国的？答案让你惊讶](#) [How did Marx evaluate Russia? The answer will surprise you], *Jinri Toutiao*, 9 June 2021 – accessed 22 August 2025.

that can be read as criticism of China’s current regime, and, because of censorship and the risk of account suspension or worse, such voices are rare. Noticeably, another comment was allowed to stand: “Tsarist Russia seized a lot of Chinese land. Vladivostok was originally the land of the yellow race.” This, as we have seen above, is a constant Russia-critical theme in China’s social media that does not draw the attention of state censors.

#### 5.4. OMISSIONS

Omissions are sometimes just as important as what is explicitly stated. For instance, there is no mention of Russia being China’s

*In all but a few positive articles and comments, Russia’s colonial legacy is not mentioned*

older brother (or vice versa). However, the most apparent gap pertains to the positive depictions of Russia – in all but a few positive articles and comments, Russia’s colonial legacy is not mentioned. While this omission may be excused in some cases, it begs for an explanation in others. For instance, the colonial history of Northeastern Siberia and China’s northeast simply cannot be told without discussing Russia. This region was loosely affiliated with the Chinese empire before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was encroached upon by Tsarist forces from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, with full annexation after the Treaty of Aigun (1858). Yet some authors tell this part of China’s colonial past without attributing any wrongdoing to Russia. One article titled “Northeast Has Always Been the Northeast of Chinese People! The Prologue of a Hundred Years of National Shame Begins” starts with the Japanese expansion to Manchuria and manages to narrate the story of China’s national humiliation and colonialism while mentioning Russia only once, as a losing side in the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>195</sup> This portrayal of events aligns with Moscow’s assertion that Russia has never colonised any other nation and that it is the strongest force in history

<sup>195</sup> 歷史奇談 (Lishi Qitan), [东北从来是中国人的东北！百年国耻的序幕拉开](#) [Northeast has always been the northeast of Chinese people! The prologue of a hundred years of national shame begins], *Jinri Toutiao*, 5 October 2022 – accessed 13 May 2025.

to oppose western colonial ambitions.<sup>196</sup> It is apparent that this omission serves to sustain the emotional resonance with Russia.

### *Another noteworthy omission is of Ukraine as one of the two warring parties*

Another noteworthy omission is of Ukraine as one of the two warring parties. This has two sides. Sometimes, Ukraine is not given its due agency in the war out of strategic concerns or because of the need to pay lip service to Moscow's narratives. News reports about the Russo-Ukrainian war often fail to attribute successful operations to Ukraine. For instance, one report about a Ukrainian drone strike does not mention Ukraine as the initiator of the attack and instead talks about the need "to ensure the flight safety of civil aircraft," even though it was apparent that this strike was ordered by Kyiv.<sup>197</sup> There is no clear logic to such omissions, however, as other news reports talk plainly about successful Ukrainian drone strikes and other military operations.<sup>198</sup> More troublingly, however, Ukraine is often left out of the analysis altogether. Many Chinese netizens who discuss the Russo-Ukrainian war fail to mention Ukrainian interests, concerns, and current strategies, not to mention giving Ukrainian history its due importance. The reason for this may have to do with the fact that Russian war narratives dominate the news, but, more disconcertingly, it may also be read as a sign that China (and the Chinese) think of the international arena as a great-power playground where China, Russia, and the US determine the fate of the small – Ukraine simply does not matter in the grander scheme of things.

The last noteworthy omission is that Putin is not usually criticised or portrayed negatively.

True, there are remarks that talk of Putin's "iron-fisted rule" or mention his strategic mistakes, and those who think of the future of "the post-Putin era," but he is not attacked directly. At first, this may not seem odd. But considering that Russia as a country and Russians as a people are widely and vehemently criticised – opinions that only infrequently attract the attention of state censorship – this omission must have a separate explanation. Lack of criticism of Putin may be because he is regarded as too close to Xi. Alternatively, Putin may be used as a proxy to criticise China's political system and Xi personally. For both reasons, criticism of Putin is suppressed.

### *Lack of criticism of Putin may be because he is regarded as too close to Xi*

<sup>196</sup>Oleksandr Polianichev. "The History of Aggression in Asia That Moscow Wants to Erase," *New Lines Magazine*, 9 May 2025.

<sup>197</sup>"Ukrainian attack sparks blaze at Russian oil depot as countries trade strikes," *The Guardian*, 3 August 2025; 环球网 (Huanqiu Wang), 俄罗斯索契市一油库遭无人机袭击 [An oil depot in Sochi, Russia, was attacked by a drone], *Jinri Toutiao*, 3 August 2025 – accessed 13 August 2025.

<sup>198</sup>红网·红视频 (Hong Wang, Hong Shipin), 俄罗斯5架战机被“摧毁”! [Five Russian warplanes were "destroyed"!], *Jinri Toutiao*, 5 August 2025 – accessed 5 August 2025.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the narratives put forth by Chinese netizens can be placed on a positive-negative axis. In between these poles are pragmatic arguments that are pro-Russia in word but not in spirit, voicing support for Moscow only because it furthers Beijing's own interests, not because Russians are naturally virtuous or Russia is inevitably victorious. All three categories entail multiple narratives, some of which are more characteristic of positive depictions of Russia (e.g., it is a victim of the west), and others more characteristic of criticism of the country (e.g., it is a greedy nation).<sup>199</sup> This inference is not absolute, as we have seen – some characteristically positive narratives about Russia may on occasion be regarded as negative (e.g., it is a large country, it has strongman leadership), depending on the value judgements of the writer. Each topic branches in turn into a multitude of lively debates in the comments section, often populated with strong aversive opinions and even stronger language, demonstrating that the three narrative categories (positive, pragmatic, negative) cannot be clearly compartmentalised but are intertwined.

*The three narrative categories cannot be clearly compartmentalised but are intertwined*

Although there is certainly an echo chamber effect to the *Jinri Toutiao* comments – articles that focus on Russia's colonial past attract more Russia-critical comments – one can also observe how Russia as a topic churns up contradictory opinions and debates in the Chinese public that are then reflected in the responses to news or opinion pieces.

The debates often swirl around Russia's war in Ukraine and the key question: What if Russia loses? But more than anything, Chinese society

<sup>199</sup> A pattern can be discerned where the Russia-friendly remarks are typically voiced in commentaria as short bursts of opinion (e.g., "Russia cannot fail!"), whereas the Russia-critical narratives are likely to be upheld in articles as well as commentaria. This may delineate a divide between the more knowledgeable authors accustomed to critical thinking and the broader masses who simply echo the official discourse.

seems to be split by Russia's colonial legacy and the lost territories of the Far East. Some insist that Russia's defeat will spell disaster not only for Russia but also for China. "If Russia is defeated," warns one commentator, "we will be next," claiming an imminent invasion by the US and its allies.<sup>200</sup> Other commentators see opportunity in Russia's ruin: "If Russia is defeated, we will seize the occasion to take back the land occupied by Russia in Siberia."

*Chinese society seems to be split by Russia's colonial legacy and the lost territories of the Far East*

Such debates in the Chinese internet space demonstrate better than anything that the Russia question is not as settled as the diplomatic pomp and hand-holding suggest, at least as far as the general public is concerned.

This has several implications for the "no-limits" partnership between Moscow and Beijing. Based on what we know of Russia's image in China, I have taken another look at the emotional resonance with Russia and the underlying rationale, and pondered what this may tell us about the CCP's preferences for the future of the Sino-Russian partnership.

Previous studies have demonstrated that Russia enjoys a relatively positive image among the Chinese populace. Although the methodological limitations of this study do not provide new data on how widely these positive narratives are upheld, there is no reason to doubt that this is indeed true. This study has instead provided new knowledge on how these positive opinions and narratives build and sustain the Sino-Russian emotional resonance. One can recognise all three types of narrative persuasion that Lu and Zhang identified as contributing to emotional resonance.<sup>201</sup>

<sup>200</sup> Comment to *历史真相背后* (Lishi Zhenxiang Beihou), *俄国如果失败了，未来会有多凄惨呢？* [If Russia fails, how miserable will the future be?], *Jinri Toutiao*, 12 February 2023 – accessed 6 August 2025.

<sup>201</sup> Xiaoyu Lu, Tinghao Zhang, "The Russian factor: emotions, narratives and reshaping China's norms in international conflicts," *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (2024).

- First, the continuity narrative insists that “it has always been like this” and so creates a natural path towards accepting new realities (norms, goals). This can be seen in the narrative that treats Russia as the inevitable victor of the war with Ukraine and a natural great power.
- Second, the analogy narrative builds emotional resonance by suggesting that the two cases are similar. An example of this type is the depiction of Russia as a fellow victim of western aggression, an Asian power, and a country with similar traits to China (e.g., large land mass, strong leader).
- Third, the identification narrative creates urgency by alluding to the possibility that something that has happened to the out-group will also happen to the in-group. Narratives of this type insinuate that once Russia has been vanquished by the collective west, China will be next.

*Chinese people still have strong feelings of animosity, grief, anger, and humiliation regarding their northern neighbour*

This systematised overview of narratives about Russia and its war in Ukraine also reveals that some Chinese people still have strong feelings of animosity, grief, anger, and humiliation regarding their northern neighbour. These and other negative emotions reflected in the *Jinri Toutiao* articles and comments are mostly the result of collective narratives about Russia’s colonial aggression toward China, which are in turn rooted in the Chinese state-led nationalism discourse and its underlying

*The fact that the Chinese authorities have not made an effort to root out all Russia-critical narratives suggests that criticism of Russia is useful for the regime*

official history narrative. Needless to say, these beliefs and feelings undermine the emotional resonance between the two countries. If we take China’s geopolitical stand-off with the US and the collective west as the only important consideration, it would be logical for the CCP to do everything in its power to suppress these

Russia-critical narratives. This is not the case, however. The fact that the Chinese authorities have not made a decisive effort to root out all Russia-critical narratives from its media sphere suggests that criticism of Russia is somehow useful for the regime.

One possible explanation alluded to above is that these voices are viewed as part of a long-term strategy. According to Callahan, “it is the job of party leaders to assess the current situation so as to determine the difference between ‘antagonistic contradictions’ that entail life-and-death struggles and ‘non-antagonistic contradictions’ that are important but not existential threats.”<sup>202</sup> In other words, China must first deal with its “antagonistic contradictions” (i.e., the US and the collective west) before it can pay attention to other struggles, such as its historical grievances with Russia. This logic builds upon Marxist dialectical materialism, where historical change is driven by contradictions and conflict – as soon as old enemies have been defeated, old friends become new enemies. So, it is likely that the CCP is biding its time before squaring its relations with the Big Goose to the north. But until the time is ripe, the

CCP must sustain these narratives, keep some control over their development, and not let criticism of Russia disappear into the vast underground of heterodox historiography.

But this eventuality may never come to pass, because of factors outside the CCP’s control. I will briefly mention two: the economy and the human psyche. The economy has been an important bulwark of the CCP’s claim to power since the 1980s. It cannot afford to suffer long-term economic problems without losing some of its legitimacy. Yet in recent years, China’s economy has been in choppy waters, and the outlook has worsened because of the trade dispute with the US.<sup>203</sup> This puts the Xi administration in a difficult fix. Theory tells us that authoritarian regimes typically revert to ideological or nationalist appeals to maintain support if performance legitimacy based on economic

<sup>202</sup> Callahan, “Chinese global orders,” 4.

<sup>203</sup> “China’s economy slows sharply in ominous sign as Trump’s trade war starts to take toll,” *The Straight Times*, 15 August 2025.

growth weakens.<sup>204</sup> As noted above, Xi's China is already more nationalistic than the China of his predecessors. If this theoretical prediction comes true, the brunt of China's nationalist anger will most probably be directed at the west. But fighting the hegemony of the US may prove a goal too distant, difficult, or abstract to have much legitimising effect, forcing Zhongnanhai to weigh the alternatives. Taiwan serves as an easier target for sure, and may be a viable option as a stand-in for US hegemony, but attacking the well-defended island comes with very high risks. And Xi knows this – if a limited embargo or an all-out attack against Taiwan fails, he will have lost all political capital and credibility, and Taiwan will most likely declare independence and be recognised as such by the west, if not more widely.

So that leaves Russia. Without wishing to give in to wishful thinking, one would be wise to keep in mind what pressures economic imperatives can put on the Sino-Russian partnership. If these pressures are severe, China's strategic partnership with Russia may be spoiled earlier than the leaders of the CCP intended, before scores with the US and the west have been settled, sidelining the geopolitical calculations of united front work. Much needs to change in the international climate, of course, for this eventuality to seem realistic. Still, if push comes to shove, CCP leaders may be tempted to go first for the low-hanging fruit of Russia's Far Eastern territories just across China's northern border. By way of preparation for this move, the CCP may rethink its censorship policies regarding criticism of Russia, which will inevitably stoke nationalistic sentiments further, making the Chinese populace increasingly venomous and angry towards Russia, and populist calls to reclaim the "lost territories" will become louder. In times of such ideological fervour, they may be hard pressed to explain to the nationalist public why they are letting Moscow off the hook. The united front work logic only works as long as it is not publicly articulated. The authorities in Zhongnanhai cannot honestly proclaim that Russia will be dealt with later, because this would do irreversible diplomatic damage and destroy the emotional

<sup>204</sup> Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

resonance between the two societies. Under such circumstances, Xi may have no choice but to make Moscow an offer it cannot refuse and demand the return of the Far East territories.

So far, no such signs are apparent. Chinese censors continue to monitor what is written about Russia (among other topics) and have removed some articles and comments from the *Jinri Toutiao* website that are critical of the country.<sup>205</sup> If anything, censorship has been tightened. This practice still corresponds to the logic of united front work, indicating that the CCP does not want anti-Russia sentiments to get in the way of its "life-and-death" struggle with the US.

*Narratives criticising Russia may have become so embedded in the national psyche that they can no longer be pushed aside*

Another explanation for why narratives criticising Russia have not been removed from the Chinese internet is that it simply cannot be done. These narratives may have become so embedded in the national psyche since their introduction in the mid-1990s that they can no longer be pushed aside for (short-term) political gain without sacrificing both the CCP's credibility and the larger legitimising rationale of the official history narrative. Chinese people care deeply about a common national territory that sustains a collective sense of self.<sup>206</sup> This was so even before nationalism as an ideology reached the shores of China, but it is even more so now, when nationalism heavily influences the Chinese perception of the world order and serves as one of the main legitimising pillars of the CCP.<sup>207</sup> This latter explanation gives more agency to the nationalist masses who may, through their demands, have more influence over the course of China's foreign policy than is often assumed. But we should also add that the elites themselves are not

<sup>205</sup> Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, "[On national humiliation, don't mention the Russians](#)", *China Media Project*, 24 March 2023.

<sup>206</sup> William A. Callahan, "The Cartography of National Humiliation and the Emergence of China's Geobody," *Public Culture*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2009).

<sup>207</sup> Zhao Suisheng, *Construction of Chinese Nationalism in the Early 21st Century: Domestic Sources and International Implications* (Routledge, 2014); see also William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives*, Vol. 29 (2004).

exempt from the influence of the nationalist history narrative and the emotional baggage attached to it. Although the CCP is typically portrayed as freely wielding nationalism according to its political aspirations, some scholars have pointed out that Chinese nationalism cannot be understood solely as a top-down process grounded in rational choice theory.<sup>208</sup> It is worth remembering that the CCP's actions have been less rational in the past. For instance, during the 2012 Sino-Japanese conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, China's leaders acted out of nationalist anger, going against their better geopolitical judgment. Therefore, Christopher Cairns and Allen Carlson caution against "working within the 'rationalist' calculus" and overlooking "the elites' own national identity construct."<sup>209</sup> This implies that the united front work rationale can explain China's approach to Russia only to a point. Beyond that, other factors may subordinate geopolitical calculations to domestic and economic concerns, or to the basic imperatives of the human psyche.

The two outlined explanations are not exclusive, of course. If we have learned anything from the above analysis, it is that there is a lively debate on Russia in Chinese society that defies neat categorisation. One can assume that this debate also affects the leaders of China. The systematised overview of narratives on Russia in this report should be read as an analytical simplification. In reality, all these narratives are intertwined, generating mixed feelings and contradictory opinions. The same person may sympathise with Russia when it is depicted as a fellow victim of western aggression and also feel anger or disgust when talking about the fact that Vladivostok is still held by the Russian Federation. This leads us to conclude that the Sino-Russian emotional resonance is neither secure nor stable, but an emotional battleground in need of constant reinforcement. The Chinese authorities must

work hard to sustain the emotional resonance with Russia or risk losing it to the centrifugal forces of nationalism. But not everything is under their supreme control.

*The Sino-Russian emotional resonance is neither secure nor stable, but an emotional battleground in need of constant reinforcement*

An almost natural conclusion presents itself: It would be wise for western allies to find ways to use the Chinese public's historical grievances against Russia to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow.

Some of the more problematic perceptions of Russia among Chinese netizens can be used to both improve domestic security in western countries and undermine the strong Sino-Russian partnership. The following policy recommendations are divided into (1) recommendations to improve domestic psychological defence, (2) recommendations on diplomacy and public communication, and (3) recommendations on the potential to use these narratives in psychological offensives against our adversaries.

*It would be wise for western allies to find ways to use the Chinese public's historical grievances against Russia to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow*

#### *Psychological Defence*

A good psychological defence relies on the willingness of the population to understand and accept policy decisions taken on their behalf. Estonian society must be prepared in advance for different psychological defence measures by increasing knowledge about adversaries and the protective measures needed to safeguard cohesion. At the moment, there is reason to believe that the Russian and Chinese societies are more knowledgeable about the west (if not Estonia specifically) than we are about them. One reason for this is the fact that there have been far more Russian and Chinese students enrolled in western universities than the other way around. This situation needs to be balanced or reversed.

<sup>208</sup>See, for example: Zhao Suisheng, *Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford University Press, 2004), 209.

<sup>209</sup>Christopher Cairns, Allen Carlson, "Real-world Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis," *The China Quarterly*, No. 225 (2016), 25.

The other side of the same coin is our readiness to withstand the psychological operations (psy-ops) from abroad. A more knowledgeable society is more resistant to influence operations from abroad – it is more impervious to misinformation and disinformation, and less likely to suffer cognitive dissonance. Creating this readiness requires educating Estonian society on the goals and means of its adversaries. By enhancing knowledge about Russia and China, Estonia will be better positioned to assess and withstand various threats.

It would be feasible to direct public attention to China as a security threat by emphasising Beijing's cooperation with Russia.<sup>210</sup> This would serve two aims: (1) Estonians would become more aware of security risks related to China's activities, and (2) Estonians would be less willing to consume Chinese goods (primarily electronics) that are classified by security organisations as potentially harmful.<sup>211</sup>

**Enhance society's knowledge about China** (and Russia) in coordination with the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) and the Cyber Defence League (*Küberkaitseliit*).

**Coordinate a campaign to spread public awareness** of the fact that China is abetting Russia in its attacks against Ukraine as well as the west, and so directly undermining Estonia's security.

<sup>210</sup>Estonia's view of China is relatively positive. A 2023 study revealed that most Estonians do not regard China as a security threat. To the question of whether China poses a threat to Estonia's security, 29% answered "definitely not" and 39% answered "rather not." The report concludes: "It may be assumed that Estonians do not regard China as a dangerous country because a threat to security tends to be interpreted primarily as a direct military threat. Changes in the international order are not perceived as security risks. China is seen as distant and therefore largely harmless." The picture is markedly different when it comes to the military cooperation between China and Russia, however: Over 50% of Estonians perceive the cooperation between China and Russia as a security threat to Estonia. Urmas Hõbepappel, "*Eestimaalaste Hiina hoiakute Uuring*" [Attitudes towards China among the Estonian population] (University of Tartu Asia Centre, 2023), 19.

<sup>211</sup>Välisluureamet [Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service], [Eesti rahvusvahelises julgeolekukeskkonnas 2024](#) [Estonia in the international security environment 2024] (Välisluureamet, 2024), 74–78.

### *Diplomacy Communication*

#### **Publicly emphasise its adverse historical experience:**

- Refer to the fact that (1) Russia annexed approximately 10% of China's territory and (2) remains the only colonial power that has not yet returned the alienated territories to China.
- Emphasise the need for Estonia's western allies to make amends with China on the issue of their colonial past. Although far-fetched, this could highlight Russia's unique position as the only state still holding territory taken from China.
- According to China's official historiography, Qing China lost the territories of Outer Manchuria to Tsarist Russia through formal international treaties. However, these treaties were concluded under military coercion. Therefore, China has a clear understanding of what it means to have treaties imposed upon it.
- In diplomatic engagement with China, Estonia should stress the importance of maintaining the integrity of international law and point to China's own adverse experiences with Russia regarding international treaties signed under duress. This awareness should be emphasised, particularly in view of the tendency among some Chinese to believe that Estonia acceded to the Soviet Union voluntarily.

### *Psychological Offence*

China and Russia understand the vulnerabilities of liberal democracies and have used them to launch psy-ops against our societies. Western allies have so far been reluctant to retaliate, probably because this has been deemed contradictory to their values, focusing instead on psychological defence. However, a consensus seems to be on the horizon that the west should no longer be passive but retaliate. This requires several steps.

First, the west must acquire better knowledge about the vulnerabilities of its adversaries. This pertains to both their domestic (societal) constraints and the liabilities in their international partnerships. This report directly addresses only the latter option.

**Fund projects to map and analyse the domestic vulnerabilities of adversaries.** This step only entails information gathering about the other polities and the cooperation between them.

After sufficient information gathering, the mapped vulnerabilities of adversaries could be worked into psy-ops tools. Creating psy-ops tools involves two steps. The first is creating a legal and political framework for the implementation of psy-ops. The next recommendation addresses the second.

**Fund projects to analyse the legal and security aspects of potential psy-ops tools.** Creating psy-ops tools requires much more than vulnerability mapping and a legal framework. The second step requires careful planning, including narrative creation and testing, target groups analysis, specification of operation time windows, description of on-ground support activities, and so on. This can be achieved by pooling expertise from different think tanks, universities, cyber defence organisations, and other partners.

**Fund closed-door brainstorming events to plan psy-ops** targeting the vulnerabilities of our adversaries, in cooperation with CCDCOE and the Cyber Defence League (*Küberkaitsealiit*). An arsenal of psy-ops tools could potentially have a deterrent effect. The mere knowledge that the west is capable of retaliating and

taking the fight to our adversaries may be enough to make Moscow or Beijing think twice before launching psy-ops of their own.

Devising an arsenal of psy-ops infringes on the much-criticised “reverse Kissinger” or “second Nixon” moment, with an aim to split the Sino-Russian partnership so that the US and its western allies would not have to face an alliance of two major authoritarian empires. This is not the place to tackle this idea in detail or criticise its rationale. With that caveat in mind, however, one can imagine two different but mutually consistent areas of psy-ops, focusing on the Russian public and the Chinese population. One potential area of psy-ops builds on engendering fear among the Russian population of Chinese revenge (either via direct military attack or a hybrid manoeuvre) so that they start questioning their reliance on Chinese support. The other would stoke the Chinese urge for revenge against Russia for its colonial trespasses. Both scenarios are hypothetical, of course, and it will take a long time for them to be implemented and take effect. It is also important to emphasise that the partnership between Moscow and Beijing is founded on many mutual concerns and aligned interests (primarily the desire to make the world safe for autocracies), and should not be underestimated. Also, both suggestions are aimed at the citizenry of the two countries, not the political elites who are highly invested in continuing the Russia-China alignment.

## ANNEX A. CONTROL OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN CHINA

Despite the emergence of a more pluralised society, the PRC remains an authoritarian state in which the CCP tightly controls public discourse – especially the narration of history – and seeks to forge a national collective identity on its own terms. State-sponsored ideology is first instilled through varied means, including the internet. The internet ecosystem operates within a relatively recent legal framework, including the National Security Law (2015), Counter-terrorism Law (2015), Cybersecurity Law (2016), and National Intelligence Law (2017).

This legal setting subjects the internet to strict censorship, forcing some heterodox voices to stay silent and shunting others into the vast space of underground historiography.<sup>212</sup> Those voices that do appear on the Chinese internet must, therefore, have (at least latent) consent from the authorities, and must be read as such. In other words, the opinions presented on public forums such as the *Jinri Toutiao* website tell us just as much about what ordinary people think as about what the CCP allows them to think. This is true even if we recognise that the authorities sometimes intentionally provide pockets of free speech for the public to vent their grievances.

In addition to formal constraints like censorship, we should also take into account the fact that internet comment sections are a medium for the outspoken. People with lower agency do not typically leave their mark on the internet platforms. Even though Chinese youths have been indoctrinated with the official history narrative for decades, not everyone has the social nerve to make their opinions heard. Also, *Jinri Toutiao* uses machine learning techniques to infer users' interests and preferences, which are then leveraged to personalise content delivery in ways that maximise user engagement.<sup>213</sup> This makes the personalised user experience subject to the echo chamber effect.

<sup>212</sup>Ian Johnson, *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>213</sup>Will Knight, "[The Insanely Popular Chinese News App That You've Never Heard Of: Toutiao uses artificial intelligence to curate headline recommendations](#)," *MIT Technology Review*, 26 January 2017.

## ANNEX B. EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

In the context of international relations, emotional resonance occurs when “actors from different states independently and synchronously feel similar emotions in reaction to the same situation because it reactivates shared emotional beliefs.”<sup>214</sup> Emotional resonance, as defined here by Philippe Beauregard, builds on people’s (historical) experiences that are reactivated by current geopolitical events.

“Instead of emphasising the logic, interest or rationale,” Lu and Zhang argue, “narratives aiming to achieve resonance focus on provoking, reshaping, and managing emotions.”<sup>215</sup> Crucially, they add, emotional resonance must come before goals and norms can be aligned. This is because affect is the basis for all decisions, including decisions based on norm acceptance and goal setting.<sup>216</sup>

In sum, if two different (national) in-groups are to hold similar values, interests, and goals, they must first have a similar affective basis that prompts a similar emotional reaction to a mutually shared threat or opportunity. And constant efforts must be made to maintain the emotional resonance between groups of people.

As a consequence of the coordinated effort to promote each other’s history narratives, the Chinese and Russians have been conditioned to feel similar emotions towards their mutual nemesis, the “hegemonic” US and the west more broadly. (Japan has been China’s primary “other” in the eyes of the Chinese intellectuals and populace at large,<sup>217</sup> but given that Japan is not a significant factor in Russia’s collective memory, this confrontation cannot be used to engender Sino-Russian emotional resonance.)

<sup>214</sup>Philippe Beauregard, “International emotional resonance: explaining transatlantic economic sanctions against Russia,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2022), 28.

<sup>215</sup>Xiaoyu Lu, Tinghao Zhang, “The Russian factor: emotions, narratives and reshaping China’s norms in international conflicts,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (2024), 1718.

<sup>216</sup>Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Pan Books, 2018).

<sup>217</sup>Brunnert, H. S.; Hagelstrom, V. V. *Present Day Political Organizations of China* (Imperial Russian Legation, 1911), 322.

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