PhD in Media and Communication Studies

China as an 'Imagined other' in Belgium: An analysis of Belgian perceptions towards China and Chinese people

Yuejue Zhang

Supervisor: prof. Pascal Verhoest, PhD

Abstract:

China has attracted global attention over the last few decades because of its newly gained position as a superpower. While many studies have examined how China as a country is portrayed in media content, there is an apparent lack of research on how Chinese people are perceived. Especially in a Western context, where China has traditionally been a stereotyped image in political discourse, how Chinese people are perceived by Westerners. In this area, perceptions of the Chinese are still largely explained by some old stereotypes – mostly physical traits and cultural attributes – that have underpinned the popularity of Chinese stereotypes since the 20th century, which may no longer accurately reflect the current state of perceptions. With the shift in the geopolitical situation along with the rise of China in the recent decade, the perceptions towards Chinese people in the West need to be updated. Furthermore, most of the studies that have addressed this issue have concentrated on the American context, with limited attention paid to the European context. Hence, this issue remains open for further exploration. Belgium, as a country at the crossroads of northern and southern Europe is an interesting case in this respect.

To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study sets out to answer the following question: How are Chinese people perceived by Western Europeans and more specifically by the Belgian population? The main objective is to undercover how individual perceptions of Chinese people are cognitively constructed. Alongside, this research is also an attempt to explore the connections between different perceptions and a variety of social background factors, with particular attention paid to individuals' media consumption diets.

Previous studies on ethnic stereotypes have typically employed a pre-established list of traits or attributes to examine individuals' perceptions of certain groups. This closed-ended approach, however, has been questioned for being inflexible and for already including the ethnic-biased answers in the statement. To overcome the limitations that existed in traditional studies, this study employs an open-based and inductive approach. It does not construct a list of traits in advance and thus tries to reduce the subjective bias from the researchers. This open-based approach is derived from the schema and connectionism theories, which yields greater flexibility over the traditional methods. This approach also contributes to integrating the different content of stereotypes with different background elements involved in a stereotyping process.

The methodology combines three methods: thought-elicitation test, thematic coding, and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). Elicitation allows people to spontaneously express their thoughts, feelings, and associations, which aligns with the intuitive thinking principles of schema theories. These elicited concepts are then subjected to thematic coding to create categories. MCA is a statistical technique employed for the visual representation of interrelated perceptions and the mapping of associations between perceptions and a range of background factors. It is therefore a hybrid approach that combines several qualitative and quantitative methods. A large inductive survey (N=600) is launched in the Flemish region of Belgium in the spring of 2022. The survey begins with an open-ended question about Chinese, where respondents are prompted to indicate any thoughts that come to mind. A set of background factor scales is subsequently added to validate the interpretation of perceptions, comprising media consumption and preferences, news interest, three prejudice-linked attitudes (cosmopolitanism, ethnicity, and social-distance attitudes), along with knowledge retention and social demographics.

The findings of this research reveal a clear distinction between personal traits, cultural attributes, and national characteristics in the context of the Flanders region of Belgium. This research shows that national stereotypes may play an equally significant role alongside personal stereotypes in the perception of ethnic minorities. It thus demonstrates a theoretical dichotomy built upon the tensions between personal and national stereotypes. Furthermore, people who report experiencing a greater social distance from the Chinese are more inclined to associate them with national stereotypes. These people are also more likely to possess higher levels of education and exhibit more knowledge about China compared to those who construct

personal stereotypes. Nevertheless, the role of ethnicity in the formation of different stereotypes appears to be somewhat mitigated.

The data on people's media consumption show significant relationships with the division of different traits and characteristics, better explained by a triangulated account of knowledge and socio-demographic backgrounds. People who construct national stereotypes display a preference for hard news over soft news, highbrow media over lowbrow media, and consume more news content over entertainment. These people are more likely to be older, masculine, well-educated, and exhibit more knowledge about China compared to those who construct personal stereotypes. This suggests that their exposure to media and choice of information sources may contribute to the formation of their stereotypes. Overall, this research highlights the importance of considering both personal and national stereotypes when examining ethnic stereotypes. It sheds light on the factors that influence their formation and provides insights into the group characteristics and social context of individuals who hold different types of stereotypes.