

Public Opinion in China

Panel:	Session 4 (Cosmos & Violet Room)
Date/Time:	Wednesday, December 12, 2012 / 09:00-10:15
Speakers:	You Sangchul, Joongang Ilbo (Moderator) Bang Hye-jung, Sogang University Chen Xiaoshen, Communication University of China Li Chunfu, Sungkyunkwan University Wang Xiaoling, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)
Rapporteur:	Niu Xiaoping, Seoul National University
Translator:	Caleb Dependahl, Science Applications International Corporation

Panel Short Summary

Bang Hye-jung

In recent years, both the extent of China's internet use and the influence of public opinion have developed greatly. Since China's connection to the global internet network in 1994, the number of Chinese netizens has grown to 538 million, and network coverage has risen to 39.9 percent. While many believe that the strength and growth of public opinion will exert great influence on political change, Dr. Bang refutes this belief. She holds that in China, the government leads society. While there is definite change in public opinion at present, these changes always occur within set political boundaries and are accordingly very limited. In China's political environment, the free expression of citizens must conform to a collective identity. Therefore, the ultimate formation of a common problem becomes quite unlikely. This is largely due to the media's inefficiency and the existence of various regulatory systems.

Dr. Bang also pointed out the importance of noting the dual nature of China's internet development. On the one hand, it has provided the populace a broader channel for self-expression. On the other hand, it has become a new platform for government supervision of public opinion and the dissemination of propaganda. According to South Korean news reports, many relevant government departments have created official websites, and more than 60,000 government officials engage in microblogging. The majority of these official websites

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and microblogs serve to channel propaganda and official notices.

In the China of today, internet management revolves around the government in the same way. This so-called management includes restrictions on technology, restrictions of internet marketers, and the blocking of select news on foreign websites. Government use of this form of management can cause the public to feel as though they are under surveillance, and that their conduct has been curbed against their will. Thus, public opinion in China is still very restricted. As to whether or not the growth of the influence of public opinion will promote the process of democratization, Dr. Bang is certainly not optimistic. Finally, she further expressed concerns over whether or not public opinion will continue to be manipulated.

Chen Xiaoshen

There is a famous saying in China that goes “*guanzhu jiu shi liliang, weiguan gaibian zhongguo.*” It essentially means “to watch with close attention is power; a mass of such watchmen changes China.” This saying undoubtedly affirms the great influence of public opinion on the formation of social and public policy. In the past two years, microblogging has truly emerged, becoming both the staging ground of public opinion and the main front for the battle of ideas.

Professor Chen believes the development, innovation, and use of information technologies has injected vitality into the growth of Chinese public opinion, and that, furthermore, this has exerted great influence on the construction of the political system. First, the number of Chinese netizens has increased significantly, with mobile netizens occupying a large proportion of that number. The comments of netizens have produced an invisible pressure on the government. Second, public opinion’s primary function has been to heighten the public’s attention to issues of livelihood, anti-corruption problems, and the outbreak of significant public events. Third, the advent of the internet has brought about the liberalization of the issues being put forth, and better reflects the voice of the people. Fourth, the time it takes for public opinion to form has been shortened, thus strengthening interactivity and timeliness of public responses to events. Fifth, the role of opinion leaders is increasingly

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prominent.

Professor Chen also pointed out that while public opinion is developing in these ways, there are also a few problems. While the scale of public opinion being expressed on the internet appears great, it lacks any organizational nature and coordination needs to be strengthened.

Li Chunfu

Professor Li discussed his personal views on the nature of public opinion between China and South Korea and how the two interact. He believes the contradictions existing in the public opinion of both countries exist primarily in the fields of history, culture, territorial disputes, and security. These contradictions in public opinion can sometimes rise to the level of national debate. For example, Chinese and Korean opinions on territorial disputes often grow to involve security issues, thus creating friction and affecting the mutual trust between the two countries. Also, differences in the political and social systems of both countries often result in a clash of values. For instance, the Chinese public's evaluation of the ROK-US alliance is usually that of dissatisfaction. To avoid these problems between China and South Korea, it is important to seek common interests and build mutual trust and respect when disputes arise. Lastly, it is necessary to make distinctions between historical and academic issues to better avoid collisions between the two countries.

Wang Xiaoling

In 2008, the Academy of Social Sciences conducted an investigation of the Chinese public using surveys and interviews to both determine how ordinary Chinese citizens viewed the world, and to analyze this mentality. The surveys included only China, the United States, South Korea, Japan, Europe and Russia.

Survey results showed that Chinese pay the most attention to the United States first, followed by Japan and South Korea, Europe, and finally Russia. When asked which countries Chinese favored most, Russia placed first, followed by Europe, the United States, South Korea, and then Japan. Reasons for favorability were primarily based upon these countries'

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economic and technological development, as well as cultural identity. However, on the subject of political systems, Chinese held reservations.

The Academy of Social Sciences also conducted surveys in each of the countries on their views of China. These survey results ranked China third in strength of international influence, behind the United States and the European Union. When asked if China could become the top world power in the future, most people thought it possible, but also believed that the US position in the world would not change much. Compared to the views of other countries towards China, the attitude of Chinese citizens proved more optimistic. The formation of this type of attitude is not unrelated to China's current domestic cultural nationalism, as well as the formation and development of its new middle class.

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