

## Image of Russia in the Chinese Culture of the 21st Century

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**Abstract.** This paper dwells upon the image of Russia, its national mentality and culture both in the broader context of the Sino-Russian relations of the late decades, and in the views of today's Chinese students studying the Russian language in China. Students have been surveyed at Shandong Jiaotong University, Institute of Foreign Languages, Russian Language Major; Sichuan International Studies University, Russian Language Major, PhD students only; Shandong Normal University, Russian Language Major; Hainan University, Russian Language Major; Xinjiang University, Russian Language Major; Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Russian Language Major; Lanzhou University, Russian Language Major; and the Far Eastern Transport University, a total of 200 students. Aside from the main study, this paper presents interviews with five teachers working at Chinese universities. The key finding is that the two countries have excellent opportunities to establish win-win good-neighborly relations in economy, education, and culture.

### 1. Relevance

Russia and China are interested in each other for many reasons. Both are the world's largest countries (one by size, the other one by population) that have a long history of friendship and hostility, as well as a long shared border. Over the last two decades, the Sino-Russian relations have seen an upswing. Both countries' leaders have taken important steps to strengthen and develop cooperation, which, according to the official statements, transformed into 'trust' in 1996 and then into a 'strategic partnership' in 2007.

However, both Russia and China recognize there are still many unresolved issues in the Sino-Russian relations; the mutual perception of the two peoples requires further research. This makes relevant what Academician V.M. Alekseyev said in the second half of the 20th century, "We have to keep an eye on China and its interest in Russia. We have to read Chinese books about Russia and their translations." [1, P. 254]

Although both countries have recently been publishing papers on the Chinese people's view of Russia, the Russian sinology still lacks comprehensive analysis of Russia's image in china. This is why it seems relevant to analyze how the Chinese view of Russia and the Russians evolved since the early 1990s to the late 2010s, a time when both cultures underwent fundamental changes, in a historical and cultural context.

Over this timeframe, both Russian and Chinese humanists and sociologists began to show ever greater reciprocal interest. Although the bulk of today's international studies is devoted to how Russia

is perceived in the West, the Russian sinologists do have some experience of studying Russia from the Chinese perspective, which includes the pioneer works by I.K. Rossokhin, A.L. Leontyev, N.Ya. Bichurin. The evolution of that perspective over the 18th and 19th centuries was analyzed by V.S. Myasnikov, Ye.I. Kychanov, N.Yu. Novgorodskaya, Yu Jie, N.V. Kühner, S.Yu. Vradii; D.N. Voskresensky described how the Russian revolutionary democratic thought was reflected in the Chinese literature. Image of the USSR in official Chinese media and scientific papers was described in the thesis written and defended by O.S. Artemyeva (Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences) in 1989, titled *Evolution of the Soviet Image in China and Sino-Soviet Relations in 1978–1989*.

Foreign historiography also offers a number of papers on how the Chinese perceive Russia. The earliest known paper is the one written by Xia Jian, an American researcher of Chinese origin, University of Berkeley, California. The paper titled *Demons in Paradise: The Chinese Images of Russia* was published as far back as in 1963. There are also papers by Wu Maosheng (吴茂生), 1980s, monographs and papers by Mark Gamsa, papers by James Carter, and some articles by Taiwanese researcher Yu Minlin (余敏玲) written in English and Chinese.

China's interest in various national images, primarily those of China itself, is a relatively recent phenomenon. There has been a surge in publications earlier in the 21st century, especially after Russia's Year of China and China's Year of Russia. Thus, *Image of Russia in Chinese Media* by Ke Huyxing, Cheng Chunli, and Wu Yan presents a comparative analysis of articles published in *Zhongguo Qingnian* in 2005 as well as during the Year of Russia in China in 2006. Notable latest materials include papers by Li Suyan, Master of History and research fellow with the Institute of History under the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, which were published in media and scientific journals in Russian and Chinese; and *Problems of the National Image of Today's Russia* by Xu Hua, a research fellow with the Institute of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia of the PCR Academy of Social Sciences. There is also a number of studies that reflect upon Russia's post-Soviet history from the early 1990s. These are: *Eluosi bu xiangxin yanlei* (Russia does not Believe in Tears, 1995); *Ibosanzhe eluosizhen* (Such Different Russians, 1997), *Xiaoyun Egozhen* (Brave Russians, 2001), *Toushi Eluosi* (A View Through Russia, 2004), *Legozhi: Eluosi* (World's Countries: Russia, 2005), *Boke Eluosi* (Blogs on Russia, 2007), *Eluosizhen* (Russians, 2008), *Tevan Pujing* (Putin's Iron Hand, 2009), among others.

Chinese media, history books, geographic and cultural studies pop-sci, as well as some research papers give a generally true, albeit incomplete picture of how the Chinese perceive Russia, its current status, its cultural heritage, geographical location, political status, and resource potential. Russia-themed articles have been published in numbers by *Renmin Ribao* (a CPC CC newspaper) and in *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (a Communist Youth League of China newspaper) over the last decade. As recently as in the early 1990s, the image of Russia was unclear and unpredictable, the country's political and economic situation seemed unstable. However, since the 1990s the papers have tended to mention Russia as one of China's key partners; the two countries had a common stance on many international issues [4, PP. 173–181]. By 2000, the partnership had become meaningful; the publications highlighted Russia's internal stabilization and its economic recovery. In general, *Renmin Ribao* and *Qungnian Bao* had a similar tone in their stories of Russia. This indicates a 'common line' of the Chinese media when reporting on Russia and creating/propagating its image. Of interest are the university materials on the history of Russia (USSR) and Sino-Russian relations.

The today's Chinese culture has *eluosi qingjie*, or 'special feelings for Russia', lit. 'the Russian complex'; those are both a specific perception and a source of Chinese intellectuals' view of Russia. *Eluosi qingjie* is mainly shared by the people born in the 1930s to 1940s, whose youth was illuminated by the Sino-Soviet friendship. Another Chinese subpopulation sharing the 'special feelings' is the later-born Chinese intellectuals that was still affected by the Russian/Soviet culture they found more accessible than other cultures even despite the Sino-Soviet relations being in decline [10]. Generally notable is the long positive impact Russia and the USSR had on China's culture and the Chinese researchers' interest in Russian education, philosophy, and culture in general.

Is the Russian complex still there in the minds of the younger generation?

The goal hereof is to analyze what Chinese students at Chinese universities and FETU think of Russia.

## **2. Eluosi Qingjie or ‘special feelings for Russia’**

Below are some of the results of a comprehensive study the author hereof carried out at Chinese and Russian (FETU, Khabarovsk) universities in February to March, 2019.

Studies included surveying 200 students, of whom:

– 130 majored in Russian Language at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Shandong Jiaotong University;

– 40 studied at the Far Eastern Transport University (majors varied);

– 5 majored in Russian Language at Sichuan International Studies University;

– 5 majored in Russian Language at Shandong Normal University;

– 5 majored in Russian Language at Hainan University;

– 5 majored in Russian Language at Xinjiang University;

– 5 majored in Russian Language at Dalian University of Foreign Languages;

– 5 majored in Russian Language at Lanzhou University

(no significant deviations was identified from university to university regardless of the country, which is why the results are generalized here)

Students were asked five questions:

1. Why Russian?
2. Will your job have anything to do with Russia?
3. Do you have friends or relatives in Russia?
4. What do you know about Russia, its people, politics, history, Russia today, and art: literature, cinema, music and songs, fine arts, theater, etc.?
5. Which Russian websites do you frequent?

The responses (students per response) were distributed as follows:

1. Why Russian?

– To study in Russia: 72 (36%)

– I am interested in Russian language and culture: 64 (32%)

– My major requires Russian: 54 (27%)

– To broaden my horizons: 6 (3%)

– To travel across Russia: 4 (2%)

2. Will your job have anything to do with Russia?

– Yes: 88 (44%)

– Maybe: 80 (40%)

– I don’t know: 32 (16%)

3. Do you have friends or relatives in Russia?

– Yes: 172 (86%), including Russian teachers teaching Russian

– No: 28 (14%)

4. What do you know about Russia?

Famous people mentioned: Putin (112), Lenin (10), Leo Tolstoy, Stalin, Dmitry Medvedev (6 each), Pushkin, Solzhenitsyn, Ivan Pavlov, Gorky, Eisenstein, and Tarkovsky (2 each).

Russian traits: enthusiasm and joyfulness (38), beauty (32), strength (22), military skills, tallness, frankness and openness (20), kindness (12), hospitability and penchant for drinking (10), seriousness (8), resilience to cold, passion, cuteness, braveness, friendliness, good education (6), golden hair, high nasal bridge (perhaps, compared to typical Chinese face), cheerfulness, carefree but responsible (4), blue eyes, generosity, photographic enthusiasm, good dancing and playing skills, romanticism, humor, Orthodoxy, good manners, braveness, stubbornness, honesty (2).

Politics: Presidential Republic (20); Putin’s tough policies as a positive trait (18), democracy and federalism (16), capitalism (14), political openness, communists, friendship with China (12),

multiethnic country, Duma (8), stability (6), strong public opinion, October Revolution, Russian Federation, a BRICS country, strong international player, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, can veto the SC's proposals (4), unfriendly to the US, Sino-Russian political alliance, multiparty system, more parties than banks, the world's largest country (2).

Russian history: USSR, strong military economy (24), Tsar (20), a country strong on the global arena (18), the world's first socialist country, socialism, strong military (10), ubiquitous strength, strong industry, powerful military (8), Stalinist economy, more women than men, rich artistry (6), pre-collapse USSR as a strong, vast, and resource-rich country, communism, superpower (4), planned economy, Alexander II reforms, economic poverty, popular unrest (perhaps referring to the Revolution or Perestroika), monarchy, Lenin, Stalin, Leo Tolstoy, weak light industries, serfdom, unique architectural style, Kievan Rus culture (2), a merger of Dark Ages and European culture, Silver Age (1).

Russia today: major international influencer (42), a military power (22), good Sino-Russian relations, well-industrialized (20), relatively weak economy (16), an advanced country (14), capital city of Moscow is a combination of ultra-modern skyline and ancient architecture, the country's the world's largest by area (6), country of arts, rich in cultural heritage, today's Sino-Russian relations are a strategic partnership, a world power capable of development, federalism, Constitutional system (10), capitalism, growing economy, liberal politics, economically developed despite cold climate, rapid developed, member state of the Eurasian Union (24), renamed Russia in 1992, a well-known military nation, a world-class power, penchant for drinking, military economy on the highest level, a democracy, a permanent UN member, resource-rich country (2).

### **3. Russian culture**

Literature: *The Captain's Daughter* and *The Bronze Horseman* by Pushkin (92), *Mother*, *In the World*, *My Universities*, *The Song of the Stormy Petrel*, *Childhood* by Gorky (47); *War and Peace*, *Childhood*, *Anna Karenina*, *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy (17); *How the Steel Was Tempered* by N. Ostrovsky (7); *Chameleon*, *The Death of a Government Clerk*, *The Man In A Case* by Chekhov (5); *Fathers and Sons*, *Sketches From A Hunter's Album*, *On the Eve*, *Home of the Gentry* by Turgenev (5); *Silent Don* by Sholokhov (3); *Dead Souls*, *The Government Inspector* by Gogol, *The Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn, *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov (2).

Cinema: *Return* (5), *The Dawns Are Quiet Here* (4), *Ice*, *Battleship Potemkin*, *Mother* (3), *Panfilov's 28 Men*, *War and Peace*, *Fathers and Sons* (2), *Spacewalk*, *Viking*, *The Star*, *Spring Tango*, *Daddy's Daughters*, *The Fool*, *The Crew*, *The Line of Fire*, *Purgatory*, *A Broken Branch*, *High-Security Holidays*, *Fall of Moscow*, *Chernobyl (Exclusion Zone)*, *Girl Without Address*, *Mother and Son*, *Russian Ark*, *Faust*, *Caucasian Prisoner*, *Watchman*, *Five Evenings*, *Man's Lonely Voice*, *Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears*, *Days of Eclipse*, *Sobibor*, *Love*, *Cuckoo*, *Stalingrad*, *Steppe*, *Sky*, *Plane*, *Girl* (1).

Music, ballet, and songs: Vitas, the most popular Russian singer (21), *The Beautiful Faraway* (13), *Moscow Nights* (11), *Katyusha* (10), *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* by Tchaikovsky (7), *Waves of the Danube* (6), *Dark Night*, *Sacred War* (2), *Ey, Ookh!*, *On the Long Road*, *Wintertime Dream*, *A Maple Leaf*, *Call Me Silently by Name* (1).

Paintings: *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (6), *Troika* (2), *Icon of the Holy Trinity*, *Repin's Portrait of Leo Tolstoy*.

Theatre: Alexandrinsky Theater.

#### **5. Which Russian websites do you frequent?**

[www.mail.ru](http://www.mail.ru); [instagram](https://www.instagram.com); [www.world68.com](http://www.world68.com); [vkontakte](https://www.vkontakte.ru); [www.yandex.ru](http://www.yandex.ru); [www.yandex.com](http://www.yandex.com); [www.vk.com](http://www.vk.com); [www.letu.ru](http://www.letu.ru); [www.dvgups.ru](http://www.dvgups.ru); [www.ilededebeaute.ru](http://www.ilededebeaute.ru) (38 in total).

Thus, given the results of this survey, Chinese students studying Russian in China or studying at the FETU generally had a positive image of Russia: they wanted to study here, with over a half of them seeing prospects for cooperation; they also showed interest in Russian culture as indicated by their knowledge of major works of the Russian literature, cinema, fine arts, music, and songs.

Interestingly, the most frequently cited Russian traits were enthusiasm and joyfulness, openness and frankness, kindness and hospitality. Positive were also such traits as beauty and tallness, strength and military skills. Even the penchant for drinking, we believe, did not have a negative connotation given the specifics of the Chinese culture. Positively evaluated national traditions and preferences included a Presidential Republican system, Putin's tough policies, democracy, federalism, capitalism, political openness, and Sino-Russian friendship. Interestingly, Russia's Soviet past (strong military economy, a strong player on the global arena, the first socialist country, socialism, strong military, Stalinist economy, pre-collapse USSR as a strong, vast, and resource-rich country, rich culture, communism, superpower, rich artistry) and its present (major military influencer, a military power, good Sino-Russian relations, well-industrialized, relatively weak economy, an advanced country, capital city of Moscow is a combination of ultra-modern skyline and ancient architecture, country of arts, rich cultural heritage, Sino-Russian relations as a strategic partnership today, a world power capable of development, growing economy, liberal policy) are also perceived positively. Given all of the above, it is not surprising whom the Chinese students mentioned as the most famous Russians: Putin, Lenin, Tolstoy, Stalin, Pushkin, Gorky... Given that today's culture focuses heavily on IT, familiarity with multiple Russian websites is also indicative of interest in Russia.

Meanwhile, it should be admitted that Russian students (except a few who are specifically interested in China) have much lesser knowledge of China. The research team did not analyze Russian students' view of China (although it could well be done in the future); however, long-time experience of teaching and sharing knowledge with our colleagues suggests that.

Of particular interest are the results of surveying older (aged 32 to 53) Chinese citizens who had higher education and above-average social status. This cohort was asked the following questions:

1. Russia is:
  - an ally;
  - a rival;
  - a neighbor;
  - other
2. What do you know about Russia's historical culture?
  - about people;
  - Russian politics (relations with China and other countries)
  - about science
  - about art
3. What do you know about Russia's culture today?

Despite having as little as five respondents, this data complements well the responses from their younger and far more numerous counterparts, which is why it is reported here entirely, preserving the original grammar:

1. Man, 32 years old, a business owner, higher education
  - Russia is a strategic partner;
  - Russian people are referred to as militaristic, which matches well their mentality. They love freedom, they are frank and simple, brave and decisive, their temperament is passionate;
  - Russian politics (relations with China and other countries): for historical reasons, Russia is in a political conflict with the US, Europe, and NATO member states; however, its role and influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe are strong, the relations with the countries from there are good. Sino-Russian relations are those of a strategic partnership;
  - Russian science: Russia inherited an outstanding R&D base from the USSR, e.g. the world's first artificial satellite. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia is still a successful military industry, but civilian light industries are lackluster;
  - Russian art: Russia has many famous writers and masterpieces (Gorky, Pushkin); its architecture is peculiar, the country has many monumental monuments; the whole world knows Russian opera and ballet, e.g. Swan Lake, Queen of Spades.

- Russian culture today: vodka is known in the culture of drinking; well-developed Internet connectivity, Russian hackers world-famous.

2. Man, 50 years old, lawyer, PhD student

- Russia is an ally;

- Russian people: whatever I know about them mainly comes from literature, with aristocracy on the one hand and peasantry on the other. Russian people are hierarchically stratified, perhaps due to the country's size and resource richness, from which a variety of people make a good living;

- Russian politics (relations with China and other countries): Sino-Russian relations are not as firm as they used to be during the Soviet times, perhaps due to politics. The Soviet Union was like an older brother to China. They had some conflicts, but using a quote from Shijing, brothers might quarrel at home and do their job elsewhere. Sino-Soviet relations were brotherly. Twenty years of Russia's focus on the West resulted in alienation. The today's relations are built on a close businesslike partnership. The countries have no political or ideological conflicts, the relations are those of neighbors who share common political interests and economic requirements;

- Russian science: the impression of Russian R&D is a two-sided coin, as on the one hand, the 'bamboo stick' effects are visible in the country's huge success, e.g. in military tech, cosmonautics, production capacity, raw materials. Perhaps, these are just the technological foundations the USSR laid during the Cold War. On the other hand, there is a 'bucket effect', as Russian R&D has so far failed to transform Russia into a superpower, and perhaps only the Russians know where the bottleneck is;

- Russian art is much better-known in China than European art. Regardless of education, all Chinese know and love Tchaikovsky (Swan Lake and The Pharaoh's Daughter). Also everyone knows matryoshka dolls and the hardships of the lower class as shown in Barge Haulers on the Volga;

- Russian culture today: I don't know much about Russian culture today, so I can't really answer.

3. Woman, 37 years old, sociologist

- Russia is an ally, but I'd still be cautious;

- Russian people are beauties and handsome guys, a hospitable and friendly people;

- Russian politics (relations with China and other countries): Russia spearheads the socialist camp, used to be the leader followed by other countries;

- Russian science: no significant discoveries observed, the Chinese market does not have much high-tech from Russia;

- Russian art has a centuries-long history and a profound cultural heritage;

- Russian culture today: an economic recession, low living standards, the state is focused on the military, the country is a science-backed military power. Since I don't speak Russian, my knowledge comes from the stories my employees and colleagues tell, I heard a few songs, liked the melody. Cultural products rarely on display here, so the Chinese have little opportunity to learn about that

4. Woman, 53, professor, English teacher

- Russia is China's neighbor, ally, and rival, as the countries' relations have seen ups and downs. No is a friend or enemy forever, only profits are forever;

- Russian people leave a heart-felt impression of a brave nation, of people that grow up in such a unique yet harsh geographical environment, and have to survive bitter frosts and vast expanses. These are stalwart and strong people, they are courageous and skillful in battle, which adds up to their wisdom and creativity that has produced such brilliant works of literature, art, and architecture the entire world praises;

- Russian politics (relations with China and other countries): the CPC has inherited the Marxism-Leninism traditions, the political education and enlightenment of the childhood, and is connected to the CPUS and Leninism; however, the Sino-Soviet relations had their ups and downs. The US was the greatest enemy during the Cold War, and each country had allies, but many allies sided with America afterwards;

- Russian science: is the world's leader in aerospace and military, I don't have a clear idea of other industries;

– Russian art: Russian literature, paintings, ballet, and other arts have been a great success, as the country has had many writers, artists, architects, and ballet masters famous worldwide. Music is a great national treasure, as Soviet songs and melodies are pleasant to listen to and are popular with the Chinese people;

– Russian culture today: I can't give an informed answer.

5. Man, PhD student, university teacher

– Russia is Russia is an ally;

– Russia's historical culture: it used to be the USSR, the world's largest country spanning across Europe and Asia, very cold in winter, a very strong military, slow economic development, insufficient agricultural production;

– Russian people: very large area, low population density, mainly Caucasian, many women and too few men, a belligerent people;

– Russian politics (relations with China and other countries): borders China, China's primary ally, a relation of mutual dependence, America's rival, under American and European sanctions, America and Europe attacking Russia's allies;

– Russian science: outstanding military R&D, world's top R&D in military applications, in conflict with the US, cutting-edge aerospace industry;

– Russian art: a lot of classical masterpieces in folk music, opera, and literature;

– Russian culture today: a revolutionary culture, Leninism, birch grove, Swan Lake, the novel *How the Steel was Tempered*.

As it seems, these five persons' responses were typical of an older (non-student) audience of educated middle class and higher social status. Thus, all the respondents considered Russia an ally (even a strategic partner), although not without rivalry and cautiousness; Russians were mainly characterized as frank, brave, freedom-loving, skillful in battle, talented, hospitable, and beautiful...; the political stance was dominated by such terms as Sino-Russian strategic partnership, brotherhood and friendship backed by Marxism-Leninism (mainly applicable to the USSR though), cooperation..., although the relations of the two countries had their ups and downs; Russian science was mainly viewed as successful R&D in military and aerospace industries (mainly applicable to the USSR), but lackluster in civilian industries ('bamboo stick effects' and 'bucket effects'); the most appreciated arts were literature (Pushkin, Gorky), opera and ballet (Swan Lake, Queen of Spades), Soviet songs; the Chinese view of the Russian culture today was dominated by vodka (an attribute of the drinking culture) and matryoshka references, also mentioning Russian factors and the Internet, the economic recession, low living standards, and recognizing the respondents' own lack of knowledge on the matter.

#### **4. Conclusion**

These results are somewhat contrary to some well-known Russian experts and politicians' claims that 'Asians are treacherous', that the 'creeping Asian expansion threatens' the sparsely populated Siberian and Far Eastern territories. Given the well-known fact that the public sentiment in China is quite indicative of their official political course, such claims seem to be more indicative of their authors' political agenda and populism rather than of the actual situation. In general, the studies show that the Chinese, whether young or somewhat older, have a positive (although not without criticism from the older respondents) view of Russia, which is an important factor of establishing good-neighborly win-win relations in economy, culture, and education, whether in short or long term. Whether we make use of it or not is up to us.

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