

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIA AND RUSSIANS IN CHINA TODAY¹

Ekaterina V. Senina
Kseniia A. Poliakova

MGIMO University

Abstract. The study of the cultural perception of countries and peoples has been gaining momentum in history, literary studies, ethnopsychology, journalism, imagology and other fields of scientific knowledge over the past decade. Cultural perception is constructed by ethnic, religious, political, ideological and artistic frames of perceptual consciousness. In connection with the development of Russia–China relations, the topic of rethinking Oriental studies in line with the framework of the studies of philosophical and cultural problems is especially relevant today. The novelty of the research consists in updating the data already available in scientific publications on the cultural perception of Russia and Russians by the Chinese. This article examines the cultural perception of Russia and Russians in China based on the results of polls conducted by the authors in 2021–2022. The poll contained open-ended questions concerning associations with Russia, symbols of the country, names of famous Russians, the Russian character, and Russian cities. The data obtained helped to identify and confirm certain historical patterns and stereotypes concerning the perception of the Russian character. The analysis of the poll results showed that Chinese people's perceptions of Russia depend largely on their personal experience with Russians. The image of Russia in the minds of Chinese people who have not been to the country is closely associated with that of the Soviet Union; they have a vague idea of contemporary life in Russia but are quite familiar with the works of Russian classics writers and composers. Chinese people who are permanent residents in the Russian Federation are more aware of both the classical and contemporary culture of the Russians. In addition, the personality of Russian President Vladimir Putin plays an important role in shaping the current perception of Russia in China.

Keywords: the cultural perceptions of Russia, Russia–China relations, symbol of Russia, Russian character, national symbols

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Senina E. V., Poliakova K. A. 2023. *Obraz vospriyatiya Rossii i russkikh v sovremennoy Kitae* [Cultural Perceptions of Russia and Russians in China Today]. *Koncept: filosofiya, religiya, kul'tura* [Concept: Philosophy, Religion, Culture]. 7(3). P. 90–103. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24833/2541-8831-2023-3-27-90-103>. (In Russian)

In recent years, relations between Russia and China at the highest political level have achieved incredible success, variously described as “better than they have ever been” and a “model of inter-state relations.”² Russia and China have very similar approaches to international issues and the world order. Russian President Vladimir Putin and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping regularly hold meetings and negotiations, calling each other “dear friend” and “my dear old friend” (我亲爱的老朋友).³ In the context of the close comprehensive partnership and cooperation between the two sides, the question of the perception of Russia in the minds of the Chinese people is becoming increasingly important. What do they think of Russian people? How stable are these images?

The theme of the image of Russia and the way the country is perceived in China has been the subject of numerous studies in Russia and abroad in recent decades. Russian works tend to focus on history,⁴ literature (Zabiyako, Senina 2021; Zabiyako 2016),⁵ sociology, and religious studies (Zabiyako etl. 2009). The history of the perception of Russia in China, and the factors that influenced this perception, over a four-hundred-year period are the focus of a study by Russian Academy of Sciences member S. Tikhvinsky (Tikhvinsky 2008). The issue of sociocultural interaction between the two peoples has been studied by N. Samoilov (Samoilov 2014), while Y. Galenovich (Galenovich 2010) presents in his study of “Chinese Marxism” through Chinese-language sources a view of Russia in the “Chinese mirror.” Of particular interest to the present study is the work of N. Ten,⁶ which explores the system of ideas about Russia and Russians in China at the turn of the century (1991–2010) and presents a comprehensive analysis based on various sources. Conceptually significant to our research is the collective work “Russians and Chinese: Ethno-Migration Processes in the Far East (Zabiyako etl. 2009), which examines the ethno-migration and ethno-cultural aspects of the interaction between Russian and Chinese people in painstaking detail, reconstructs the image of Russia and Russians, as they are perceived by Chinese people living in the Far Eastern borderland, and focuses on the mentality of the Chinese – stereotypes of perception, the categories of “friend” and “foe,” and so on. An important

² Denisov A. I. 2019. Russia–China Relations: Better than they Have Ever Been. *The International Affairs*. 2. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/2148> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

³ Russia–China Negotiations. President of Russia. *Kremlin.ru*. 30.12.2022. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70303> (accessed: 10.02.2025);

习近平同普京举行视频会晤：中俄新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系更加成熟 坚韧 [Xi Jinping Holds Video Meeting with Putin: China–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partner Relations in the New Era are More Mature and Sustainable]. *Baidu*. 30.12.2022. URL: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1753649105221306058&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

⁴ Vladimirova D. A. 2005. *Problems of Ethnocultural Interaction and Mutual Perception of Chinese and Russians in the Russian Far East and Northeast China (Second Half of the 19th – Early 21st Centuries)*. Doctoral dissertation: 07.00.03. Vladivostok. (In Russian)

⁵ Senina E. V. 2018. *Images of Mutual Perception of Russians and Chinese in Russian and Chinese Literature and Journalism of the First Half of the 20th Century*. Doctoral dissertation: 10.01.01. Moscow. (In Russian)

⁶ Ten N. V. 2012. *The Image of Russia in Modern China*. Doctoral dissertation: 07.00.03. Moscow. (In Russian)

source of information about the image of the “other” at the junction of two cultures is the work “Russians and Chinese: The Image of the ‘Other’” by Professor Li Yinnan (Li Yinnan 2010), a bilingual expert in Russian Studies who knows and understands both Russian and Chinese cultures “from the inside.” At the same time, some researchers are focusing their efforts on studying media content that gives us an idea of the image of Russia in China (Nadezhkina 2021; 2022). Studies carried out outside Russia include the seminal work *The Image of Russia in China 1949–2009* (李随安 2012) by the Chinese scholar Li Suiyan, as well as the research of Jin Gang (金钢, 2009), Chen Xiaolan (陈晓兰 2009), and others.

The theoretical basis for the study of this topic has been provided by the works of Russian scholars on philosophy and religion (Zabiyako etl. 2009), imagopoetics (Trykov, 2015; Zabiyako, Senina 2021), imagology, ethnopsychology (马得勇 2022; Oshchenkov 2010; Stefanenko 2004), and other disciplines.

According to psychology, “image of perception” is a reflection in the ideal plane of an external object that affects the sense organs.⁷ “Perception” as such is interpreted as a “subjective image of an object, phenomenon or process that directly affects the analyser or system of analysers.”⁸ “Image” is a key concept in the works of philosophers, philologists, psychologists, and art historians. According to classical philosophical interpretations, the image “... reveals to our gaze not an abstract essence, but its concrete reality.”⁹ Thus, an image is a “phenomenon that arises as a result of the imprinting of one object onto another, which acts as a perceiving formation, be it spiritual or physical; the image is the transformation of primary being into secondary being, reflected and enclosed in a sensually accessible form.”¹⁰

In our study, the Chinese population acts as the receiving party. A key condition for an analysis of the receiving party as a specific entity is the identification of a phenomenon that would consolidate this community as a single national and cultural consciousness and its implementation in self-awareness. The essence of the work of this kind of social integrator is “in the understanding and experience by the group” of the phenomenon of its community (Zabiyako 2009: 124). The most important factors in the formation of perceptions in the interaction of cultures are: national and cultural picture of the world; cultural constants; and mechanisms of intercultural relations (these include stereotyping – auto- and hetero-stereotypes, reflection, culture-centrism, casual attribution, etc.). Since national and cultural stereotypes are images of social objects that are entirely dependent on the perceiving subject, a “mirror image” or “image of mutual perception” arises.

⁷ Zinchenko V. P. Cultural Perception. In Meshcharyikova B. G., Zinchenko V. P. (eds.). *Comprehensive Psychological Dictionary*. AST Press. (In Russian)

⁸ Zinchenko V. P. Perception. In Meshcharyikova B. G., Zinchenko V. P. (eds.), *Comprehensive Psychological Dictionary*. P. 106–107. AST Press. (In Russian)

⁹ Hegel G. W. F. 1968. *Aesthetics*. In 4 Vols. Vol. 3. Iskusstvo. P. 345. (In Russian)

¹⁰ Zabiyako A. P. 1998. Image. In *Culturology. 20th Century. Encyclopaedia*. Vol. 2. Universitetskaya Kniga. P. 102.

By “mutual perception,” we mean a phenomenon that arises as a result of the formation of a differentiated holistic idea of the “other” among representatives of contacting cultures depending on the worldview of the perceiving subjects, spatiotemporal conditions, national, cultural and ethnic consciousness, constants and stereotypes, past experiences, and one’s own assessments and attitudes (Zabiyako, Senina 2021: 166–171). The way peoples perceive each other also depends on the quality of the bilateral relationship (and the opposite is true as well – the quality of these relationships is influenced by the images and stereotypes that each party has developed).

Chinese researchers note that understanding the way that Russia and Russian people are perceived in China helps Chinese people understand themselves: “By studying and evaluating the image of Russia in China, we can learn about the customs, ideas, living standards, moral values, mentality, psychology, motivations, and needs of the Chinese” (李随安 2012). What is more, understanding the content and characteristics of the formation of cultural perceptions of Russia in China (and in the minds of the Chinese people) can help when it comes to holding negotiations and building business relations with China.

Assuming that the national and cultural self-awareness of the Russian and Chinese people, along with various subjective factors, determines the state of Russia–China relations, we can state that the present study focuses on the national and cultural self-awareness of the Chinese people, which is of interest to us primarily from the point of view of its specificity in terms of the mass sentiments that are inherent in it. The subject of this paper is the specific qualities of Russia and Russians as seen through the eyes of the Chinese people. The study covered images of Russia and the stereotypes that simplify them – both those formed based on historical experience and situational ones formed under the influence of current circumstances. Over the course of 2021 and 2022, surveyed 102 Chinese nationals online to determine their perception of Russia, reconstruct the characteristics of the national and cultural consciousness of the Chinese people in terms of identifying their in-built collective ideas about Russia and Russian people, and clarify their behavioural motivations based on these ideas. The long-term goal of developing this project is to create a blueprint of existing patterns that would clarify existing similarities and differences by comparing “fresh” data with the way of perceiving Russia and Russians that has formed over the course of many years. The research toolset used was an open-ended online questionnaire on the Chinese Tencent platform (腾讯问卷系统) (in Chinese). The sample was random, with respondents selected from a list of broad-coverage groups (groups that were easily accessible via the internet – in our case, these were mostly students, who were invited to take part in the study). The respondents were divided into three groups: those who live in Russia (15 people); those who had visited Russia at least once (38 people); and those who had never been to Russia (49 people). As the survey progressed, certain patterns started to emerge in terms of how people who had been to Russia perceive the country. The survey also collected data on gender (42 men and 60 women) and age: 18 and

younger (14 people); 19–35 (82 people); 36–50 (four people); and 51 and older (two people). The researchers do not claim that the survey questions were sufficiently comprehensive to provide a complete picture of how all groups of Chinese society perceive Russia and Russians. At the same time, the distribution along the vector “visited Russia” – “never visited Russia” allows us to state that this is a significant factor in studying the image of Russia in China and its influence on at least some groups of respondents.

Associations

The first question in the questionnaire was “What associations does Russia have for you?” Respondents who had been to Russia responded: *Red Square, vodka* (伏特加 – fútèjiā), *martial people / warlike people / a fighting nation* (战斗民族 – zhàndòu mínzú), *bears, culture and art, Putin, cold, and snow*. Respondents living in Russia mostly mentioned *cold, martial people / warlike people / a fighting nation, bears, culture and art* and *Putin*. The most popular answers among those who had never been to Russia were as follows: *USSR* (苏联 – sūlián), *martial people / warlike people / a fighting nation, bear, vodka, Putin, armed forces, and beautiful women*. From here on, words are arranged in descending order of frequency.

All three groups mentioned *Putin, martial people / warlike people / a fighting nation, and bears*. Let us examine each in greater detail. The frequency of the word *Putin* speaks to the influence of the personality of the President of the Russian Federation on the formation of the cultural perception of the country. The authors of the article “The Image of Russia in Chinese Media (Koshkarova, Mukushev 2021) analysed publications of the largest Chinese media and identified the topics that were of most interest to the Chinese audience, including “the personality of Vladimir Putin and his participation in international politics” and Russia as a “fighting nation” (Koshkarova, Mukushev 2021: 90). The frequent mention of President Putin and his participation in meetings and negotiations between the Russian and Chinese leaders in the Chinese media often personifies the way Russia is perceived – in other words, the country is associated with the individual. As N. Ten has noted, the perception of Russia in China started to be limited to the actions of the country’s leader started in the 1950s and was often shaped by his personal qualities. An important reason why the image of Vladimir Putin has been positive in China since 2000 has been his stance on the issue of the development of Russia–China relations.¹¹ And the same rings true today. Based on this fact, we can assume that 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. This, incidentally, correlates with the inviolable constant in the Russian mentality of the “patron image” [Stefanenko, 2004: 149].

¹¹ Ten. P. 116.

“Fighting nation.” We should note here that such images as martial people / war-like people / a fighting nation crop up not only on social media and in the daily life of the Chinese people, but also in the official media. “Warlike people” in an unofficial name for Russians, imbuing them with such qualities as endurance, willpower, the desire to overcome life’s obstacles and other positive qualities (Koshkarova, Mukushev 2021: 91). It should also be noted that the Russians are the only nation the Chinese have given a second name to. It started to spread on Chinese social media back in 2013 in connection with the deterioration of U.S.–China relations and the burgeoning co-operation between China and Russia in various areas, including the military. But it was not until the “Crimean Spring” of 2014 that the name finally stuck. The reference to Russians as a “fighting nation” is a nod to the heroism and fearlessness of the Russian people. Interestingly, in 2016, the Chinese government launched a campaign to change this image of Russians: the idea was to convey to the Chinese people that it is they who are the real “fighting nation” and heroes should be sought at home. This is what led to “fighting nation” becoming an internet meme that year (Evdokimov, Savkin 2021: 1494).

“Bear”. In traditional Chinese culture, the bear (熊 – *xióng*) is mentioned as a totem animal as early as the Xia dynasty (2070–1765 BC). The image also appears in such historical treatises as the “Classic of Mountains and Seas” (山海经 – *shānhǎijīng*, 476–20 BC) and “The Historical Records of Sima Qian” (史记 – *Shǐjì*, 104 BC). In ancient times, it was believed that the bear possessed the great and incredible power of “death and rebirth, since it does not eat or move for several months and is fully revitalized when it emerges from its sleep. These qualities were enough to deify the animal. Emperors of ancient China even took on second names containing the character 熊 (*xióng* – “bear”). For example, the legendary Yellow Emperor Huangdi (黄帝), the founder of Taoism and the ancestor of all Chinese people had a second name 有熊氏 (*yǒuxióng shì*). And one of the many names of the founder of the Zhou dynasty, Jiang Ziya (姜子牙), was 飞熊 (*fēixióng*). It was believed that if a pregnant woman dreams of a *xióng* (“bear”), she would have a son, and if the emperor dreams of a bear, he will have a loyal and capable minister.¹² However, over time, these connotations have undergone significant changes, and an image of the bear has emerged that is entirely the opposite of what had been before. Today, the word “bear” in Chinese is associated with the meaning of a “large, stupid, clumsy, simple-minded, and even useless animal” (Lin Xue, 2019: 179]. We can thus assume that the association of Russia with the “bear” in Chinese culture has created a similarly ambivalent image of Russia in the minds of the Chinese people

¹² 白双法 [Bay Shuangfa]. 2013. 汉字文化。今日解字『熊』：其实人家一点也不“熊”！ [The Culture of Chinese Characters. The Current Interpretation of the Word “Bear”: People Aren’t Bears!]. 双法字理 [Shuangfa jiyi]. 09.11.2013. URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/274370383_648695 (accessed: 10.02.2025)

On the other hand, jumping ahead a little to the section on symbols of Russia in the minds of the Chinese, we note that the “bear” as a symbol of Russia appears as an image on various emblems. For example, a clear, easy to understand, and widely used symbolic image is that of a panda and a brown bear symbolizing the Russia–China cross years of culture. The emblem clearly demonstrates the officially established prevalence of positive connotations in relation to the image of the “bear.” As we can see, the zoomorphic metaphor “bear,” which is firmly entrenched in the consciousness of the Chinese (and not only Chinese) people as an unofficial symbol of Russia can be perceived differently depending on the political discourse, the current situation, the individual’s own attitudes, past experiences, knowledge, and the psychology of the perceiving subject.

“Vodka”. It is noteworthy that many of the respondents who had never been to Russia, or those who had visited for short periods, mentioned *vodka* as a word they associate with the country, while Chinese people residing in Russia did not. This discrepancy suggests that this stereotype disappears from the “mental map” of ideas about Russia after spending a significant amount of time in the country.

That said, “vodka” is seen in China as a product of Russian social culture, which is directly connected with the Russian character. Some sources note that the word *vodka*, in connection with the Russian character, is associated, on the one hand, with courage, hospitality and bravery, and with a lack of initiative, malice, and poor impulse control, on the other.¹³ “Vodka” thus acts as kind of frame into which the collective image of Russian people fits, with all their positive and negative character traits – which, incidentally, is also characteristic of Chinese dualism.

“USSR”. A large proportion of respondents who had never visited Russia noted the association with the USSR (in contrast to the other two groups – people who had visited Russia or who lived in the country). It is worth pointing out that Chinese people generally see Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union. Most of those who mentioned the USSR were young people (three respondents under the age of 18; 46 aged 19–35; and one person aged 36–50), that is, their age corresponds to the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They did not experience the rise or decline of Soviet–Chinese relations and do not feel nostalgia for the USSR. It is safe to assume that the image of the Soviet Union was passed on to them by the older generation, who studied Marxism–Leninism and world history at school and university. Accordingly, most of their knowledge about Russia comes from the older generation based on the history of the 20th century, communist ideology, and other attributes of the image of the Soviet Union. As a result, the “historical” image of Russia in the minds of a part of Chinese society is superimposed on top of the current agenda, and this determines the nature of their expectations (although this is likely to change significantly, be restructured, or disappear upon a confrontation with reality).

¹³ 伏特加酒 俄罗斯的传统酒精饮料 [Vodka. The Traditional Russian Alcoholic Drink]. *Baidu.com*. URL: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BC%8F%E7%89%B9%E5%8A%A0%E9%85%92/1272654> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

Other images. Unlike the other two groups, the respondents who had never visited Russia did not mention cold weather. They did, however, mention beautiful women. It is unclear where this image comes from.

The Symbol of Russia

When asked “What is the symbol of Russia?” most of the people who took part in our study said, “the bear.” Those who had been to Russia in the past noted such words as *Red Square*, *vodka*, *double-headed eagle*, *Putin*, and *cold*. In addition to the bear, respondents who had never been to Russia named the “Soviet Union” and related concepts (*communism*, *Bolsheviks*, *Lenin*, etc.), *cold* and *strength* as symbols of the country. They also noted the appearance and beauty of Russians: *tall*, *beautiful girls*, *tall*, *white-skinned people*, *high bridge of the nose* (高鼻梁).

“Double-headed eagle.” Respondents who live in Russia mentioned the *double-headed eagle* as a symbol of Russia. Those who had never been to the country did not. This is likely because they are less aware of the coat of arms of Russia than their compatriots who either live in or have been to Russia and whose imagery has been expanded by the symbol – a symbol that is widely used in official and unofficial (primarily visual) content (documents, outdoor advertising, etc.).

“Bear.” As we noted earlier, the image of the bear also appears in the responses as a symbol of Russia. Bears appear in Russian folk tales, fiction, and in the works of famous Russian artists, all of which contribute to the consolidation of the image of the bear in the minds of the Chinese people as a symbol of the country: “The image of the bear is often used by the Russian government to present the country as a strong and hospitable state. For example, Misha the Bear was the symbol of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, and the Polar Bear was a symbol of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. The bear is often depicted on the stands and banners of Russian representatives at international exhibitions.”¹⁴

Interestingly, the only respondents to mention Red Square as a symbol of Russia was those who had visited Russia but do not live there. From this, we can assume that this symbol is connected with the experience of visiting this place: Red Square is the heart of Russia, its most important tourist attraction, and the first thing that tourists visit when they are in Moscow.

The responses to the second question more or less follow the same patterns as those identified in the analysis of responses to the first question: the Soviet Union and the appearance of Russian girls was only noted by those who had never been to Russia.

¹⁴ 何雨濛[Хэ Юмэн]. 2019. 浅析俄罗斯文化中“熊”的形象[A Brief Analysis of the Image of the “Bear” in Russian Culture]. *北方文学* [Northern Literature], 23. URL: https://wenku.baidu.com/view/92a68626a7e9856a561252d380eb6294dd8822ca?r=xueshu&_wks_=1683823124563 (accessed: 11.02.2025)

Famous Russians

When asked “Which famous Russians do you know”? more than half of the respondents wrote the name of the Russian president. Those who had been to Russia mentioned Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Maxim Gorky. The reference to the classics of Russian literature can be explained by the fact that the Chinese school curriculum includes works by the Russian masters.¹⁵ The reading list for secondary school pupils includes “To the Sea” and “If by Life You Were Deceived” by Alexander Pushkin, *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy, and the “The Song of the Stormy Petrel” by Maxim Gorky.¹⁶ Other texts recommended for introductory reading include *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, etc. The list of famous Russian names also includes Maria Sharapova, who rose to fame in China thanks to her successful performance at the WTA tournaments held in the country in 2017–2019 (the Tianjin Open in 2017 and the Shenzhen Open in 2018 and 2019).

Those who had never been to Russia named Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, as well as Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. The names of the latter, as one of the authors of this study, Ekaterina Senina, noted from her interviews, are known to the respondents from the course on Marxism–Leninism. It is well known that ideology plays an important role in the education of the younger generation of Chinese people – it is hardly surprising that our conversations with students (aged 20–35) revealed that the images of Lenin and Stalin are frequently idealized in the minds of Chinese people.¹⁷ This group of respondents also mentioned the Russian singers Polina Gagarina and MakSim and the rock band Lyube. Regarding Lyube, the respondents curiously noted that “China does not have such a patriotic band.” The participants in the survey also named Russian governmental and political figures who are “popular in China today” – Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, which indicates an awareness of and interest in current political events in Russia.

Those who live in Russia noted the Russian classic writers Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov. Like the authors mentioned above, Chekhov’s works are also included in the curricula of Chinese middle and high schools (specifically

¹⁵ Basic Provisions of the High School Language and Literature Curriculum (Revised Draft Version). Website of the Language and Culture Press (Yuwen Chubanshe) under the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. URL: <http://www.ywcbs.com/index.do> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

¹⁶ 高中生必读书目 (精选38本 [List of Required Reading for High Students (38 selected texts)]. 11.05.2023. URL: <http://jiaoyu.woyoujk.com/x/40427.html> (accessed: 11.02.2025); 部编本初中、高中语文教材目录 (全) [A Complete Reading List for Middle and High Schools Compiled by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China]. 01.07.2021. URL: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/385852282> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

¹⁷ Field Study Observations. 2011–2022. Archive of Ekaterina V. Senina.

“The Chameleon” and “The Man in the Case”).¹⁸ This group of participants also stated the names of Lenin and Stalin. They also mentioned several contemporary Russian artists (the list is somewhat longer than the one for respondents who had never been to Russia): Polina Gagarina, Morgenshtern, Egor Kreed, MakSim, etc. The fact that the members of this group know Russian gives them access to modern Russian culture (although, we should note that the survey was conducted in Chinese).

The Russian Character

We asked the respondents to list at least three positive qualities of Russians. Most of the respondents from the three groups wrote 热情 (“hospitality” – the word was used to describe Russians back in the 1920s), noting the warmth, cordiality, and geniality of Russian people (Senina 2017: 160). Many of the participants in the survey noted that Russians seem indifferent and cold on the outside but are in fact warm and friendly. This is explained, according to the Chinese, by the fact that Russians combine the characteristics of Western and Eastern peoples. Most respondents also pointed out the straightforwardness and sincerity of Russians, describing these qualities with different words containing the morphemes 直, 爽, 诚, etc. (for example 直爽 – *zhíshuǎng* (“frank”), 好爽 – *hǎoshuǎng* (“open”), 真诚 – *zhēnchéng* (“sincere”), 直率 – *zhíshuài* (“straightforward”), 正直 – *zhèngzhí* (“truthful”), and others).

Respondents who had never been to Russia also noted the bravery, openness and strength of spirit of Russians, while those who had travelled to the country were even more emphatic about the bravery and friendliness of the Russian people. The group of respondents living in Russia noted the perseverance, courage, determination, generosity, and hospitality of the Russians.

In the minds of the Chinese people, the generosity, hospitality and openness of Russians are associated with the vastness of the Russian territory and its rich resources,¹⁹ while courage and strength of mind are elements of the image of Russians as a “fighting nation.”²⁰

The only group of respondents to note the friendliness of Russians was the one made up of those who had visited Russia but do not live there.

To obtain a more rounded portrait of the Russian person, respondents also listed *negative qualities* that they associate with Russians. Chief among these in all three groups of respondents was straightforwardness (in the negative sense of the word):

¹⁸ 通高中课程标准实验教科书·外国优秀短篇小说选读·教学资源 [Standard Experimental Textbook for Secondary School. Selected Works of Foreign Writers. Educational Materials. 语文出版社教材研究中心编 [Edited by the Centre for Textbook Research of the Language and Literature Publishing House]. 2019. Beijing. URL: <https://ziyuan.shuziyuwen.com/qbzy/videoshow/17326.html> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

¹⁹ 金兆泽 [Jin Zhaoze]. 2013. 浅谈俄罗斯人性格的形成因素以及性格特征 [On the Factors of the Formation of Personal Characteristics of Russians]. 青春岁月 [Qingchun Suyue]. 2. P. 1.

²⁰ 赵文君 [Zhao Wenjun]. 2018. 我眼中的战斗民族 [A Fighting Nation in My Eyes]. 神州学人 [Shenzhou Xuezheng]. 1. P. 36–37.

most of the answers given contained words with the morpheme 直 (直接 – “direct,” 直率 – “straightforward”). Second, many noted the coldness (冷漠 – “indifference, apathy, coldness”) of Russians, claiming that Russians do not like to laugh (不喜欢笑). The coldness of Russians is often contrasted with their cordiality and hospitality. This shines a light on the contradictory nature of the Russian character, and it is in this context that the Chinese draw attention to the fact that the Russian character combines the qualities of both “the people of the West” and “the people of the East” (东西方):²¹ for example, the Russian character combines the imagination inherent in the West and the rationality of the East (东方的理性与西方的想象在自己的身上结合起来) [宋瑞芝, 宋佳红, 2001: 84]. It is well known that what a European would call the “golden mean” is a long-established value in traditional Chinese culture (中庸). The duality of the Russian character may thus be interpreted in China as wild mood swings from one extreme to the other. The data obtained during the survey supports this assumption: the respondents who do not live in Russia repeatedly noted that Russians often perceive things too radically, making mountains out of molehills.

It should be noted that many of those respondents who do live in Russia mentioned that Russians treat foreigners with distrust, that they have prejudices and preconceptions about non-Russians. For example, guests on the “Grey Mokko” podcast about Chinese people in Russia often say that Russians treat them with suspicion, and they are often seriously worried that the Chinese will take over the Far East (for more on this, see the “Grey Mokko” podcast – 俄罗斯灰摩卡).²²

Russian Cities

When asked which Russian cities the respondents knew, almost all of them answered Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Many of those who had been to Russia mentioned *Yekaterinburg*, *Sochi*, *Kazan*, *Nizhny Novgorod* and *Vladimir*. Participants in the survey who had never been to Russia replied, in addition to Moscow and St. Petersburg, *Yekaterinburg*, *Vladivostok*, and *Volgograd*. It should be noted that many of the respondents in this group wrote *Lenin-grad* instead of *St. Petersburg*, and *Stalingrad* instead of *Volgograd*. In other words, the Chinese do not pay attention to the fact that cities known for their heroic defence during the Second World War have since changed their names. It would be fair to assume that the respondents may be familiar with the works of famous Chinese poets and writers of the mid-20th century dedicated to these cities such as Guo Moruo’s “Ode to the Soviet Red Army,” Shuipai Yuan’s “Song about Stalingrad,” “News of the Victory at Stalingrad,” and others. The second, anthroponymic, hypothesis has to do with the

²¹ For more on this: 荣洁 [Jung Jie]. 2005. 俄罗斯民族性格和文化 [The Character and Culture of the Russian People]. 俄罗斯东欧中亚研究, [Research into Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia]. 1.

²² Grey Mokko 俄罗斯灰摩卡. URL: <https://taplink.cc/greymocha> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

surnames Lenin (列宁 Liènníng) and Stalin (斯大林 Sīdàlín), which are easy for the Chinese to pronounce and understand, and which lend their names to the toponyms Leningrad (列宁格勒 Liènnínggélè) and Stalingrad (斯大林格勒 Sīdàlín'gélè). And the third hypothesis is historical memory. The older generation continues to use these names for cities today, and they likely pass on this knowledge to the younger generation. We can thus conclude that Chinese people do not make a distinction between the Soviet past and modern Russia (St. Petersburg / Leningrad), nor do they treat Soviet history as a separate area of study (Volgograd/Stalingrad) – their knowledge of Russian cities comes primarily from the school and university history curricula and from the older generation. The respondents who live in Russia also noted the cities of Kazan, Yekaterinburg, Vladivostok, Sochi and Murmansk. It is also worth noting that a small proportion of each group of respondents mentioned Murmansk, where the northern lights can be witnessed.

It is worth pointing out here that Chinese people learn about the city of Sochi through the Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, which is part of the school curriculum. And the fact that Sochi hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics also boosted the city's image among the Chinese.²³

The final question in the survey was "If you could travel anywhere in Russia, where would you go?" The top answers in each of the three groups were Moscow, St. Petersburg, Sochi, and the Caucasus. Many respondents also said that they would like to go to Murmansk, again because "you can see the northern lights there."

Respondents who had visited Russia in the past stated that they would like to visit Yekaterinburg, while those who had never been to the country said they would like to see Stalingrad (Volgograd). The people in this latter category were all under the age of 36.

For the most part, the Russian cities that the respondents could name and would like to visit are in regions with the largest flows of Chinese tourists.²⁴

Conclusion

Our examination of a random sample of respondents ranked by the level of the personal experience of visiting Russia and knowledge of its culture allows us to conclude that the image of Russia and Russians that exists in the minds of the Chinese people reveals much about the Chinese themselves. This image is a projection of ideas about Russia and Russians framed within existing stereotypes. As the individual gets to know Russia, some of these images and stereotypes fade or even die out completely

²³ 路易斯, 袁晨雨 [Lu Yisi, Yuan Chenyu]. 2014. 索契冬奥之后 [After the Olympic Games in Sochi]. *旅游世界* [Tourism World]. 3. P. 44–57.

²⁴ Most Popular Russian Regions for Chinese Tourists Revealed. 2021. Association of Tour Operators. 21.12.2021. URL: <https://www.atorus.ru/news/press-centre/new/58155.html> (accessed: 10.02.2025)

(“vodka”), to be replaced by other images and stereotypes. However, they all reflect some aspects of Russian reality and the mentality of Russians that are significant for the Chinese.

The survey results also show that personal experience of visiting Russia is not the only factor that influences the perception of Russia in China, as education level, communication with Russian people, and general knowledge of history and literature also play a part. For most of the respondents who have never been to Russia, the image of the country is closely associated with the image of the Soviet Union. Unlike Chinese people who live in Russia, those who reside in China have only a vague idea of contemporary life in Russia, although they are aware of the names of Russian classical writers and composers – that is, their knowledge of Russia is dominated by images associated with the school curriculum, as well as with the traditions of cultural interaction between the two countries. Politics is another factor that plays a major role in shaping the current perception of Russia in China. President Putin’s popularity in China has a positive impact on the way Russia is perceived as a country. As for the personal qualities of Russians, the Chinese see them as a strong people with a cast-iron will. At the same time, the Chinese note the duality of the Russian character: they are cold, indifferent and distrusting of foreigners, yet at the same time hospitable, cordial and friendly. These characteristics have remained largely unchanged over the course of several decades and reflect specific attitudes of the Chinese people towards Russians.

About the Authors:

Ekaterina V. Senina – Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor in the Department of Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and Laotian languages at MGIMO University. Moscow, Russia.

E-mail: e.senina@my.mgimo.ru

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4724-7890>

Kseniia A. Poliakova – student in the School of International Economic Relations at MGIMO University. Moscow, Russia.

E-mail: ksenia.china@yandex.ru

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