

Top Down vs. Bottom Up: Reconsidering the Role of Rhetoric in Sino-American Relations

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ABSTRACT

The Sino-American relationship navigates the politics between two of the most influential nations on the world stage today. Previous research clearly establishes that political rhetoric and public opinion are explicitly tied; a bottom-up approach involving public opinion driving political rhetoric and a top-down approach involving political rhetoric driving public opinion within the field of politics are frequently described to show this link. Is it the bottom-up approach or top-down approach in each the United States and People's Republic of China that drives the relationship between the two nations? This paper answers this question through a comprehensive Quantitative Content Analysis analyzing textual evidence by Chinese and American politicians between 2008-2018, scoring them on a Likert scale from -3 to +3 to quantify this information. Public opinion surveys and data from Pew Research Center were also used to overlay onto the rhetoric scores in order to identify trends in the relationship. For the United States, research suggests that political rhetoric significantly affects public opinion in a top-down relationship. For China, evidence supports that a bottom-up relationship is not engaged, but is insufficient to conclude that a top-down approach is employed. This further implies that communication between politicians of both nations are key to the successful development of current U.S.-China relations.

Introduction

The discussion of the complex relationship between the United States and People's Republic of China is considered one of the great "central major-power foreign policy issues of our time" (Lampton, 2019). As a growing world power, China threatens the close influence of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region, while also continuing to expand its influence throughout the global system. With such a meteoric rise over the past two decades, the international system has experienced its "most profound transformation" in at least a quarter century (Maher, 2018). Now, the Sino-American relationship is considered one of the most profound bilateral relations in the world. With fundamentally different political, social, and economic systems present in their societies, the U.S. and China face propensity toward challenges, and even greater barriers in cooperation. Tensions across both countries and their partners have risen, causing serious implications, both politically and economically, on the growth of conflict between the two major powers (Young, 2015). Previous research has defined two political ideas surrounding political rhetoric and public opinion; however, it has not been established whether a "top-down" or "bottom-up" approach drives the Sino-American relationship. Therefore, the Researcher employed a Quantitative Content Analysis on various forms of rhetoric by the governments of the United States of America and People's Republic of China in order to score the impact and tone of the textual materials. This score was then overlaid with public opinion data in order to determine whether a "top-down" or "bottom-up" approach was behind the fluctuations in US-China relations.

Literature Review

Principles of Government and Public Opinion

This paper identifies two main relationships in regards to people and government (Green-Pedersen, 2019). First, the “bottom-up” approach finds government rhetoric and action as dependent on the variable of public opinion (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). The second approach, called “top-down,” recognizes that government actions and language directly influence the dependent variable of public opinion (Zukin, 1992). In regards to the Sino-American relationship, the usage of negative language by political figures across both nations have led to a deterioration in the public opinions of the two nation’s peoples. Current literature consistently falls into one of the two categories and is aimed toward describing the relationship; the Sino-American relationship is infrequently mentioned in this setting. It is crucial to first understand this relationship between people and government in both the United States and China before we can analyze the effects between political rhetoric and the subsequent friction that has set into Sino-American relations.

Identifying the “Bottom-Up” Approach

Some prior research in the field suggests that public opinion has a substantial impact upon policy decisions (Burstein, 2003; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Wlezien & Soroka, 2007), judicial policies (Cook, 1977; Hanych et al., 2023), and other government processes in democratic states. This public opinion driven relationship is often denoted in current literature as a “bottom-up” approach. This is shown below:

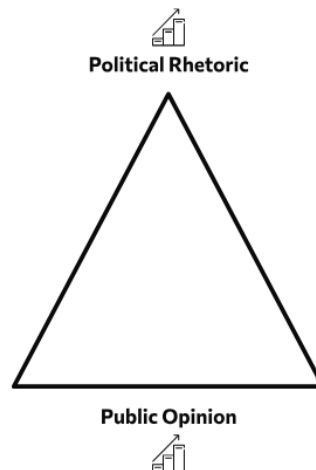


Figure 1. Bottom-Up Approach Diagram. Demonstrates the principle of the bottom-up approach. As public opinion shifts and becomes more negative, a shift in the tone of political rhetoric will occur in the same direction, or vice versa, showing that the public influences the actions of the government.

In a crucial study, Brandon Rottinghaus (2008) states that “public opinion places serious constraints on presidential framing of foreign policy” based on three historical case studies and using White house archival data (Rottinghaus, 2008). This means that the actions of presidential administrations over history are restricted by public opinion and opinion polling, notably in cases of foreign policy. This research, along with others, argues for a strong link between public opinion and decision making by government officials, and how opinion polling does make a difference on how the government takes action on policy decisions, notably in cases involving foreign policy.

Identifying the Non-Correlated Approach

However, some researchers in the field believe that public opinion does not play as large of a role in policymaking (Petry, 1999). In a study by Paul Bernstein, professor of sociology at the University of Washington, he explains that studies “overestimate the effect [of public opinion on public policy] because they focus on issues - those especially important to the public” (Burstein, 2006). In his study, Bernstein finds that when including “less-important issues” into consideration, opinion has “considerably less impact” than in traditional statistical studies. This research reinforces a key point that some issues, such as foreign policy, are more sensitive to public opinion, while others are considerably less sensitive to this influence. Furthermore, a paper by Christopher Wratil, a professor of government at the University of Vienna, and other researchers show that while “governments implicitly represent public opinion, they do not systematically invoke their voters explicitly, suggesting the public matters but in different ways than often assumed” (Wratil et al., 2022). This suggests that while governments tend to represent the rhetoric their constituents advocate for, they do not consciously craft their policy decisions or language based on opinion polling. This suggests that public opinion does not affect government policies in the way other research has suggested.

Identifying the “Top-Down” Approach

Other research in the field comes to a different conclusion that political and government rhetoric is behind shaping public opinion (Bakker et al., 2020; Simon & Jerit, 2006; Nelson, 2004). This relationship in which political opinion is the driver is denoted in literature often as the “top-down” approach. This is shown below:

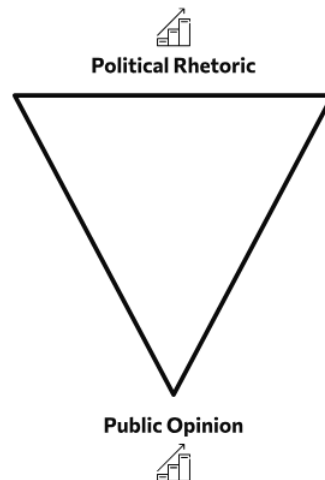


Figure 2. Top-Down Approach Diagram. Demonstrates the principle of the top-down approach. As political rhetoric shifts and becomes more negative, a shift in the beliefs or opinions of the public will occur in the same direction, or vice versa, showing that the words of the government influence public opinion.

In an influential study done by Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2002) states that the popular belief that “politicians habitually respond to public opinion when making major policy decisions is wrong.” Their research indicates that public policies by officials such as former president Bill Clinton are not significantly affected by public opinion. However, going further, the study goes on to state that the “crafting of their words [framing] and actions has a profound impact on the mass media and on public opinion itself” (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002). This is a step further that finds that politicians, through carefully analyzing and crafting speech and rhetoric tailored to the public, have the ability to influence what the public believes. In fact, Blumenau & Lauderdale (2022) find that political rhetoric likely

affects public opinion, but goes further to explain findings that there is “large variation in the persuasiveness of arguments of the same rhetorical type across issues” (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2022). Enforcing this point, Cohen & Hamman (2003), in their research on the effect of Presidential rhetoric on public economic perceptions, argue that “because of their nature,” foreign policy speeches will have a greater impact on the public’s “future orientations” than any other type of speech (Cohen & Hamman, 2003). This research shows that the way American or Chinese politicians describe their counterparts and their countries have a great impact on the way public opinion is shaped. This belief that government rhetoric influences public opinion is what scientists in the field call a “top-down” belief in government.

Bottom-Up Approach in Democratic-Leaning Systems

In the Western-style system that the United States operates upon, there is an expectation that the government serves the purpose and advocacy of the people. Famously, Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, asserts that the U.S. government is “of the people, by the people, and for the people...” (Library of Congress, 2014). This “bottom-up” assumption for democratic systems of government is essential to the connection between public policy and public opinion polling. Martin Gilens, a political scientist at Princeton University, calls the “ability of citizens to influence public policy” the “bottom line” of a democratic government (Gilens, 2004). This is the reason for a typical belief that the United States employs a bottom-up approach where public opinion has an impact on government policy and rhetoric. However, in democratic systems, rhetoric echoed by the state and the general media can also affect the public’s perception. In Sino-American relations, degrading and negative rhetoric that is typically used against China is described as “China Bashing.” Carlos D. Ramirez, in his paper “The Effect of ‘China Bashing’ on Sino-American Relations,” defined this term as “the tendency [for Americans] to print or report articles, editorials, and commentaries that are overly critical of China or that tend to demonize it” (Ramirez, 2012). However, the term “China Bashing” has been around since at least the 1990s in research and rhetoric, and it carries a common understanding of speech or policies that cast the People’s Republic of China in a negative or unfavorable light. For Ramirez, the term is referencing the usage of language by American communications media. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term “China Bashing” is defined as the negative or critical language by politicians against the government, country, or population of the People’s Republic of China.

Top-Down Approach in Authoritarian-Leaning Systems

For authoritarian systems that states such as China operate upon, there is a general assumption of a “top-down” approach between the public and the centralized government. Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, professors at UCLA, suggest that all authoritarian governments “attempt to control the flow of news and information to the public” (Geddes & Zaller, 1989) and that political rhetoric by the central government, echoed through state media, has significant influence over public belief. In another study, according to Jie Ouyang and other researchers of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, in authoritarian states such as China, the “incentives of local players are largely shaped by higher-level governments” (Ouyang et al., 2020). This suggests that the goals and ideas of the public or local government are directly impacted by the direction of the central government, supporting the idea of a “top-down” approach.

Research Gap

The current field discussing Sino-American relations tend to analyze either the potential future of the bilateral relationship (Friedberg, 2005; Young, 2015; Maher, 2018; Lampton, 2019), or the current China and U.S. policy objectives on each other (Dreyer, 2008; Saunders, 2016; Swaine, 2019; Hass 2020). Research on the relationship between

China and the United States entering the second decade of the twenty-first century also centers around the effects of the Trump Presidency (Beckley, 2020; Laurence et al., 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Boylan et al., 2020; deLisle, 2021; Yang, 2021). This paper inserts itself in the effects of political rhetoric and public opinion on the Sino-American relationship. The gap that exists is in the determination of which approach, top-down or bottom-up, affects the relationship between public opinion and government rhetoric in regards to foreign policy in Sino-American relationships. This paper aims to establish whether political rhetoric of both the governments of the United States and People's Republic of China has affected the public perception of the opposing country, or if the opposite is true. Is it the bottom-up approach or top-down approach in each the U.S. and China that drives the relationship between the two nations?

Methodology

In order to pursue a conclusion to this hypothesis, the Researcher employed the method of Quantitative Content Analysis in order to determine the type of relationship that exists between public opinion and government rhetoric on foreign policy regarding Sino-American relations (Rose et al., 2014). By analyzing written texts including transcripts of speeches, interviews, debates, official remarks, and press statements, this paper used the different forms of language from top political figures of both the United States and China, alongside currently updated public opinion polling, primarily from Pew Research Center, to determine whether rhetoric drives public opinion or vice versa. In order to specifically target this phenomenon, the researcher limited the number of groups involved in the cycle of policy-making for this paper to just the "public" and the "government," representing a single strand of the many complex relationships that exist, excluding the roles that lobbyists, media, and state or local shareholders play in the cycle. Current research hypothesizes that in typical democratic systems, it is natural for public opinion to take a leading role in determining political action or rhetoric, notably within the United States, and research on authoritarian nations, such as China, tends to suggest that political rhetoric drives public opinion polling on major issues, as the centralized government sets nationwide policy. However, both systems of government have received credible opposition to these claims by various sources that assume the opposite force is the driver.

Textual Materials and Selection Criteria

The Researcher used a variety of sources to acquire sufficient amounts of relevant content of rhetoric by Chinese and American political figures. The criteria for the selection of this material included 1) a sufficient number of references to the Sino-American relationship or the opposing country between the U.S. and China, 2) the speaker being a significant figure relating to the political governance of the country, and 3) be made within the timeframe constraints placed on the data of the paper. In the case of this paper, the researcher set the bar of "sufficient" references at a minimum of five ratable mentions, an arbitrarily set number in order to ensure a target level of accuracy when scoring papers. To ensure the credibility of the rhetoric in the research, only language used in official transcripts by the relevant government were included as textual references. Furthermore, only references from major political figures in both nations were included in the process to ensure that the rhetoric was diffused to a large swath of the population and public. A similar study was conducted by Christopher Cochrane from the Department of Political Science of the University of Toronto, who employed an "automatic sentiment analysis," frequently used in political science, to quantify the emotional qualities of texts, transcripts, and videos from the Canadian House of Commons (Cochrane et al., 2021). This method and technique is similar to this paper in the aspect of quantifying the tone and rhetoric information from texts, but is applied toward a different population and for certain key words and phrases rather than the texts as a whole. Other research has also used the "sentiment analysis" in order to use technology and digital resources to code the sentiment of materials in Indian politics (Dwivedi et al., 2023), social media (Drus & Khalid, 2019), and other related sectors in political science. The time frame included for this paper covers the years 2008 to 2018 to evaluate a

significant portion of the modern Sino-American relationship. At the beginning of this timeline, the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics occurred, an event considered one of the heights of the cooperation between the United States and China, especially with the attendance of President George W. Bush at the time (Glaser, 2008; Zhongying et al., 2008). On the other end of the spectrum, 2018 marked the beginning of a U.S.-China “Trade War,” involving a significantly tenser and more threatening relations between the two nations, one of the lowest points in cooperation and friendliness (Cerutti et al., 2019; Huang, 2021). The timeline covers both two Chinese Presidents (Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping) and three American Presidents (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump), also providing insight into how different leadership shifted public opinion or tone on the foreign policies for the Sino-American relationship. This range of ten years also provides a large enough span of time to closely examine the potential correlational relationship between public opinion and the tone of political rhetoric. Throughout this timeline, the Researcher also named several events of interest to the Sino-American relationship to anchor each text to (an “anchor year”), providing a strong point in time to associate the tone of rhetoric. Narrowing to the text used for the American side of the analysis, the Researcher deemed it necessary to separate and individually identify the nuances between foreign policy of the Democratic Party (D) and Republican Party (R), especially given the two-party system that dominates American politics. According to Pew Research Center, a widely respected polling center, “Republicans have long held more unfavorable views of China than Democrats,” making it necessary to address this political bias (Silver et al., 2020). This was accomplished by providing an equal number of transcribed statements by Democratic and Republican figures in their respective parties, mitigating the potential for biases in the tone of rhetoric toward China. On the other hand, the Chinese side of the analysis proved to be much more cohesive, and did not require as much of the subcategorization that American speeches required due to the authoritarian or one-party nature of China. Therefore, textual materials were kept as one large pool and not broken down into further subcategories that the American texts were sorted into. In order to maintain a consistent level of accuracy between the Chinese and American speeches, owing to the differences that could emerge from a larger quantity of American speeches compared to Chinese ones, the Researcher chose a 2:1 ratio for the selection of texts for each anchor year. This not only provided a consistent basis for the number of materials required for each anchor year, but also equalized the number of American-Democratic text, American-Republican text, and Chinese text (a 1:1:1 ratio).

Table 1. Selection of Textual Materials.

Selection of Textual Materials				
Anchor Year	U.S.	Republican	Democrat	Chinese
2008	6	3	3	3
2011	6	3	3	3
2015	6	3	3	3
2018	8	4	4	4

¹ Shows the 2:1 ratio of U.S. textual materials to Chinese ones (e.g. 2018 has 8 U.S. texts to 4 Chinese ones), as well as the 1:1:1 ratio between American Democrat, American Republican, and Chinese speeches (e.g. 2018 has 4 US-Republican, 4 US-Democrat, and 4 Chinese texts).

Analytical Process and Quantifying Textual Sentiments

Through a variety of methods employed by the Researcher, political rhetoric from official transcripts were gathered through government, company, and other associated sites. Each transcript of the rhetoric was saved as a PDF file, and stored in relevant folders pertaining to the timeframe and national origins of the remarks. When saving each PDF file, each one was labeled accordingly by 1) year of address, 2) speaker, and 3) whether it was from a Chinese or American politician. After each speech analysis was completed and the “score” of the text was computed, the materials would

be marked at the beginning of the label with “F.V. -”, representing the words “final version” to ensure the text would not be re-processed or analyzed again. After each section of speeches were complete (e.g. American 2011, Chinese Original 2011), the folder containing the specific category of text would be marked as “COMPLETE”. This process of labeling ensured a clean and organized research process when performing annotations during the analysis procedure. Within the process, each speech was broken down by paragraph. In order to pursue a more quantitative-oriented research and to align with previous research in the field (Chung, 2019; Gueorguiev, 2021; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002), the Researcher evaluated each section of text through a seven-point scale that was used, ranging from -3 to +3, depending on the tone and impact of the rhetoric. This method of scaling is known as a Likert Scale, typically used in surveys and polling (Batterton & Hale, 2017; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). This nontraditional application of a Likert Scale converts the typical usage for surveys and polling to a more analytical-based use for text, with the Researcher themselves determining the “points” for each textual reference. Therefore, the typical negative to positive range is retained; however, the context of the scale is revised for use in this paper. The scale used in the evaluation uses seven points ranging from “very negative” (-3), “negative” (-2), and “slightly negative” (-1); to “neutral” (0); to “slightly positive” (+1), “positive” (+2), and “very positive” (+3). The “very negative” category is associated with the worst or most impactful negative rhetoric exchanged between the U.S. and China, while the “very positive” category is characterized by the most praise-filled or strongly positive rhetoric. The “neutral” category is reserved for statements containing non-biased comments, or comments that contain an equal amount of criticism and praise, balancing the statement’s tone to net-neutral. In order to analyze each text, the Researcher assigned a point value to each paragraph. In order to ensure a rigid scoring procedure for the paper, the Researcher followed the general guidelines outlined by this scale and the chart below:

Table 2. Scoring Procedure Guidelines.

Scoring Procedure Guidelines	
(VP) +3	<u>Positive National Commitments</u> (ex: “...committed to...”)
(P) +2	<u>Positive Comments</u> (ex: “...truly express our thanks...”)
(SP) +1	<u>Importance of Relations</u> (ex: “...must work together...”)
(NE) 0	<u>Listing Accomplishments</u> (ex: “...have established...”)
(SN) -1	<u>Disagreements</u> (ex: “...continue to have differences...”)
(N) -2	<u>Direct Criticism or Accusation</u> (ex: “...unfair practices...”)
(VN) -3	<u>Warning or Negative Label to Country</u> (ex: “...cannot stand apart...”)

² Demonstrates the coding of each point value and general statements that would fall under each category: “Very Positive” (VP), “Positive” (P), “Slightly Positive” (SP), “Neutral” (NE), “Slightly Negative” (SN), “Negative” (N), “Very Negative” (VN).

Even as the Researcher follows these scoring guidelines, there are implicit tones that can be picked out of the rhetoric without explicit statements. Implications of negative or positive undertones are present in a great amount of political rhetoric, and the inability to accurately judge these are a notable limitation to the analysis of the texts. However, through this quantitative analysis of the data, the Researcher is able to gather a fairly accurate representation of the tones of each text. After using this general guideline to score each paragraph of the transcripts, the total instances

of scoring and total points (e.g. $[-3] + 3 + \dots + [-2]$) are collected. These are used to compute the composite average total score per piece of text to reflect the overall tone of the text in the following formula:

$$\text{Total Points Collected (N1 + N2 + \dots + Ns)} / \text{Scoring Instances (s)} = \text{Average Score}$$

Additionally, the usage of this type of scale and finding the composite average points have been used in other quantitative content analysis papers, such as Nimrod (2009), who used the point system from “negative” to “positive” and computed a composite average for their methodology (Nimrod, 2009). After the scoring of each piece of the textual evidence, the score data collected was compiled into charts that sorted them into their respective anchor years. Then, the average score for pieces of rhetoric within each anchor year was calculated with the formula below:

$$\text{Score of Each Text (N1 + N2 + \dots + Nt)} / \text{Number of Texts (t)} = \text{Average Anchor Yr Score}$$

Polling Data

The average anchor year score was calculated and used to compare with the polling data available for the specific years. The opinion polls used for the data were primarily compiled by Pew Research Center, a trusted international polling center, from their Spring Global Attitude Surveys (Pew Research Center, 2008-2016); however, the Researcher notes in 2017 and 2018, the People’s Republic of China was not included in surveys conducted, meaning that opinion data from those two years were missing, a noticeable limitation in the research. However, because of the existing polling data covering a sufficiently large portion of the ten-year span of the research, and the decision to keep uniformity on the source of the opinion polling, the Researcher decided to omit Chinese favorability of the United States for 2017-18. The opinion polling gathered by Pew Research Center is found below:

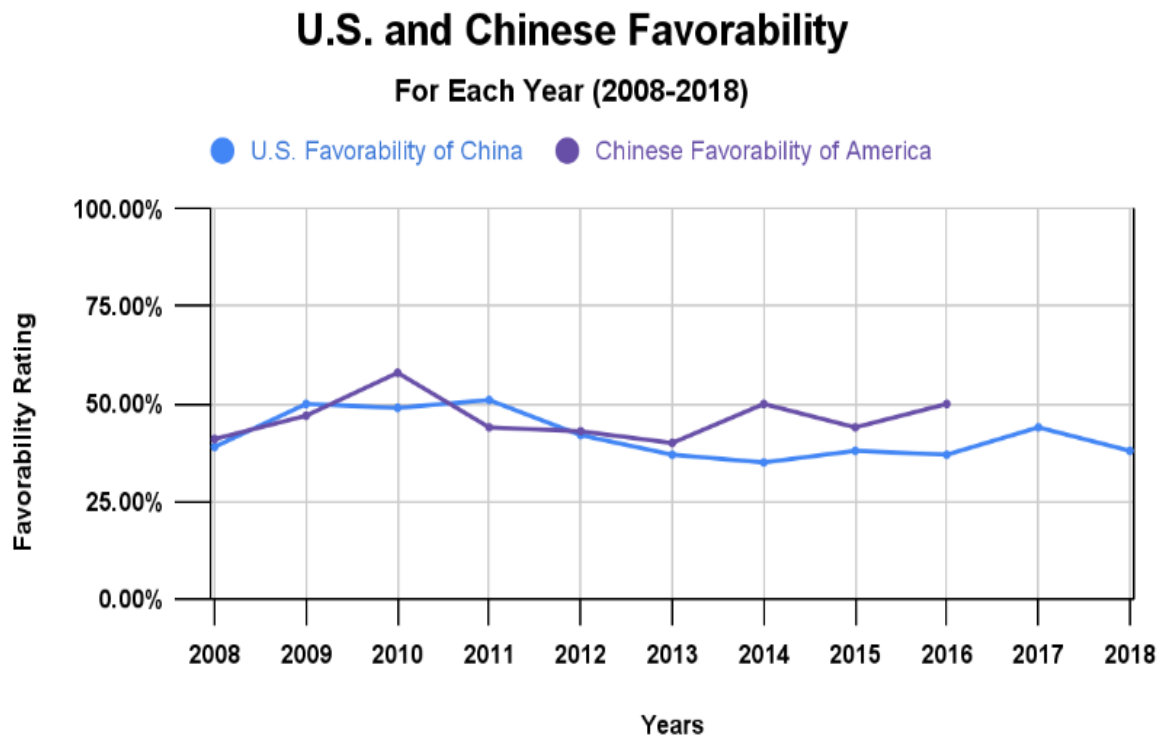


Figure 3. U.S. and Chinese Favorability. Shows the polling data from Pew Research Center’s Spring Global Attitudes Survey, from the years 2008 to 2018. Data from the People’s Republic of China is unavailable for 2017-18 due to the lack of surveys done by Pew in the nation for those two years.

The data obtained from Pew asked Chinese respondents the question: “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of...the United States” to survey Chinese favorability of the United States, and asked American respondents the question: “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of...China” to survey American favorability of China, producing a percentage favorability of the public from both nations. This polling data was then overlaid with the compiled scores of the textual references in this paper in order to compare the data and draw various conclusions.

Data and Results

From the analysis of the textual materials conducted, the total “scores” for each anchor year was found by totaling and averaging texts within the timeframe of the years. For the purposes of this paper, a corresponding score around the bounds of -0.5 to +0.5 would be considered a mild or less intense negative or positive score, respectively. A score that is around -1 or +1 is considered a moderate score, with -1 to +1 and above being considered a strong score in terms of intensity. The results are as follows:

Table 3. Anchor Year Totals (US Left/China Right).

Anchor Year Totals (US Left/China Right)		
2008	0.583	0.833
2011	-0.893	0.633
2015	0.045	0.903
2018	-1.545	-0.455

³ Anchor Year Totals (US Left/China Right). Shows the corresponding Anchor Year average rhetoric score from -3 to +3 (using the same Likert scale that was discussed in the methodology). The average score for the U.S. for 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018 are shown on the left, while the average score for China was shown on the right.

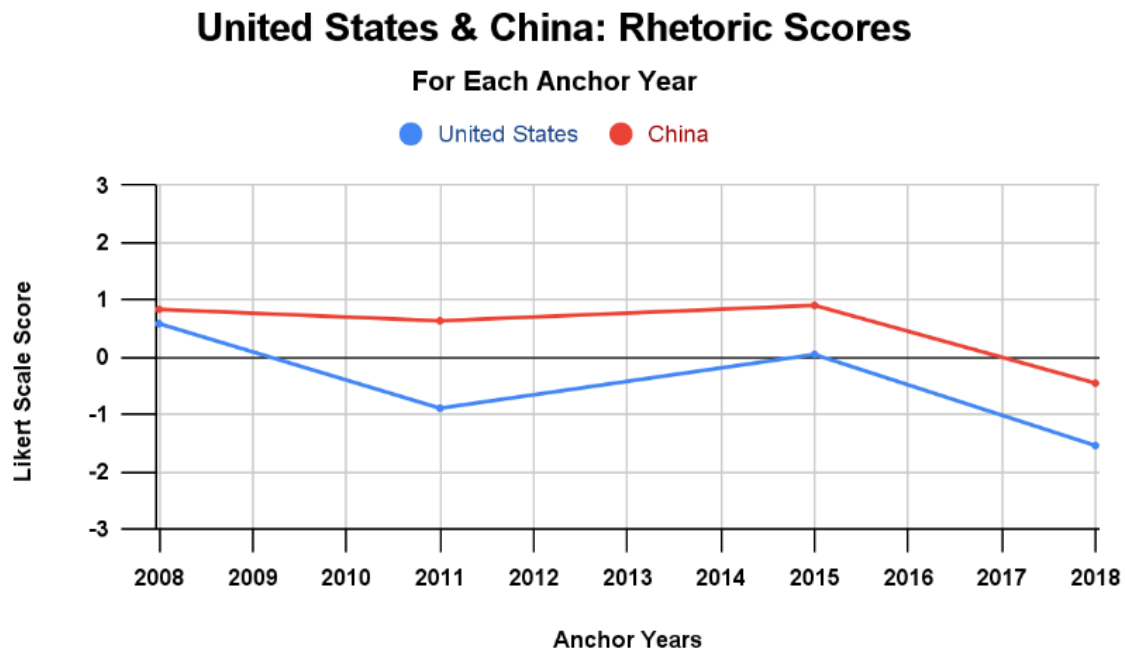


Figure 4. United States and China: Rhetoric Scores. Shows the corresponding anchor year average rhetoric score from -3 to +3 (using the same Likert scale that was discussed in the methodology) in graph form for the U.S. and China for 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

From the results above, there is a clear distinction in terms of China having relatively more positive scores compared to the U.S., particularly noticeable in the 2011 Anchor Year, where a -0.893 score for the American rhetoric was matched with a +0.633 score for Chinese rhetoric. However, it should be noted that both nations' rhetoric follows a general trend of becoming relatively more negative between 2008 and 2011, more positive between 2011 and 2015, and significantly more negative between 2015 and 2018. For the Chinese side, this trend was less noticeable and more subtle, with changes being within 0.500. This had a notable exception with the change from 2015 to 2018 being more than a 1.000 change. Meanwhile, the American side had more pronounced turns in political rhetoric, with swings between positive and negative around a 1.000 change between each anchor year. However, an important limitation of this paper to note is that data gathered from the American side tended to be from more diversified sources, including interviews and domestic addresses on China. However, text from the Chinese side tended to include more official statements or ones made at U.S.-China events, which could significantly limit the intensity of any rhetoric used. This difference in sources of the textual evidence could very well have led to the variation in the slightly more positive Chinese tone compared to the American ones. However, the basis of the research involving the distinct trends of the data remains unchanged and minimally affected by this variation in source material.

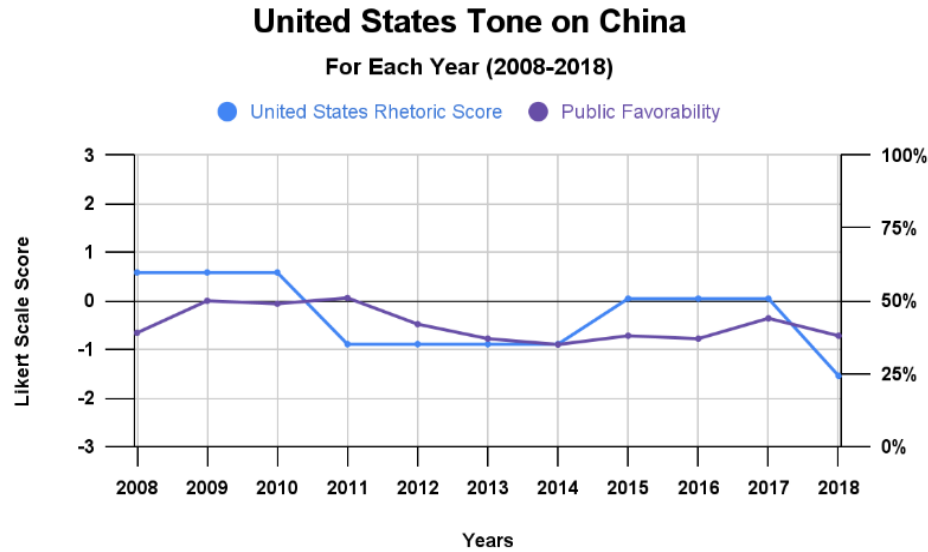


Figure 5. United States Tone on China. Shows the corresponding anchor year average rhetoric score of American politicians from -3 to +3 overlaid with public favorability of China in graph form for the U.S. for 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

From the figure above, there is a strong suggestion that rhetoric drives U.S. favorability of China. In 2008, a relatively positive tone of rhetoric (0.583) was followed by three years of higher favorability of the Chinese (39%, 50%, 49%). In 2011, the tone score fell dramatically (-0.893) and what followed was a drop in public sentiment toward China (51%, 42%, 37%, 35%). After 2015, where the tone drastically shifted to a mildly positive tone (0.045), American opinion of China continued to shift upward (38%, 37%, 44%). However, with the beginning of the U.S.-China Trade War, rhetoric took a large dive (-1.545) in 2018, and immediately, public opinion fell alongside this decrease (38%). This statistical data presents sufficient evidence to suggest that the United States does employ a top-down approach in the Sino-American relationship.

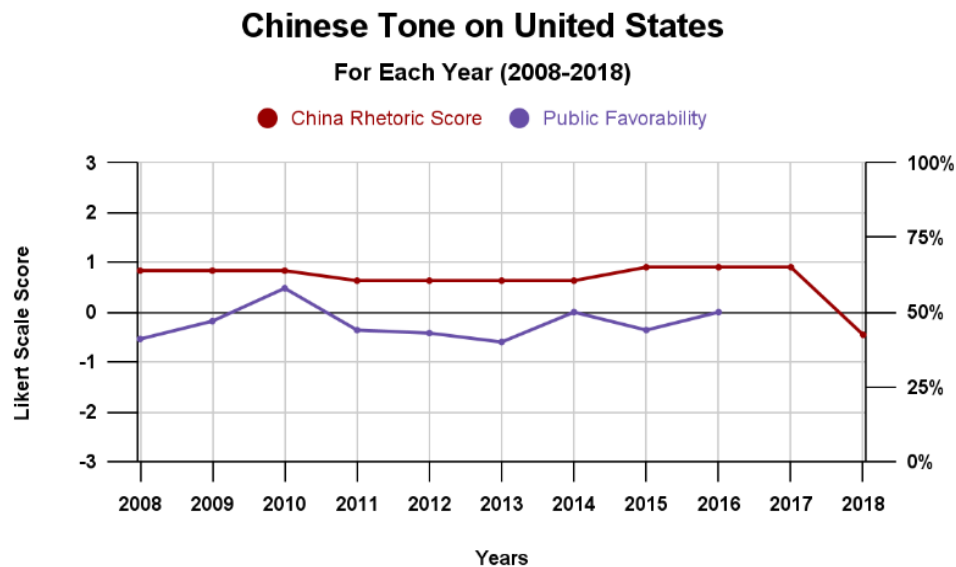


Figure 6. Chinese Tone on the United States. Shows the corresponding anchor year average rhetoric score of Chinese politicians from -3 to +3 overlaid with public favorability of the United States in graph form for China for 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

The figure above provides conflicting evidence about the link between public opinion and rhetoric for China and the presence of a bottom-up or top-down approach. In 2008, the rhetoric score for Chinese politicians was relatively positive (0.833), which was also followed by an increasing trend in public favorability (41%, 47%, 58%). However, public opinion fell to 44% by 2011, a dramatic decrease that did not sync with the slight fall in rhetoric score in 2011 (0.633). On the other hand, the rhetoric score in 2011 was accompanied by a decrease in favorability in the following years (44%, 43%, 40%), more supporting evidence of a top-down approach. In 2015, with a higher score of rhetoric (0.903), public favorability does show an increase in the following year (44%, 50%); however, it should be noted that there was a measured favorability decrease from 2014 to 2015 (50%, 44%) that does not match with any change in rhetoric score. These inconsistencies in results and rhetoric to opinion poll matching present convincing evidence that China does not employ a bottom-up approach, but not sufficient evidence that China employs a top-down approach. This marks the data as inconclusive for the Chinese side.

Discussion

Results and Discussion: United States

From the data, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that within the Sino-American relationship, the United States engages in a top-down approach where government and political rhetoric drives public opinion. This conflicts with previous believed notions that democratic systems such as the United States tend to employ a bottom-up approach, as outlined by Gilens (2004) when he states that “the ability of citizens to influence public policy” is the “bottom line” of a democratic government (Gilens, 2004). In the United States, the political language used in regards to their Chinese counterparts have increasingly soured during recent periods of time. In essence, data suggests that a decrease in the positivity political rhetoric is correlated with a decrease in public favorability of China; therefore, there is evidence that the negativity of rhetoric or use of “China Bashing” by U.S. politicians is what has caused the significant decline in US-China relations, since the beginning of the Trump Administration (2017). Ultimately, this paper is evidence that strongly supports the presence of a top-down approach in the United States that is contrary to the hypothesized bottom-up approach of democratic-leaning systems.

Results and Discussion: China

Data for China shows there is sufficient evidence to believe that the bottom-up approach is not used, but with the results of this research, the data is not strong enough to support that China uses a top-down approach. This also presents an interesting conflict with past beliefs that authoritarian systems more strongly engage in a top-down approach, as stated by Barbara Geddes and John Zaller (1989), who suggest that all authoritarian governments “attempt to control the flow of news and information to the public,” and that political rhetoric by the central government, echoed through state media, has significant influence over public belief (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). Data also suggests that Chinese favorability of America has tended to stay high (reaching 50% in 2014 and 2016) despite falling U.S. favorability of China. This seems to suggest that falling U.S. favorability and increased negative American rhetoric on China has pulled Chinese public favorability down as well. However, unlike the projection that there would be stronger indications of a top-down approach in authoritarian-leaning systems such as China, this paper identifies a weaker correlation in that approach relative to the data for the United States.

Greater Sino-American Implications and Further Research

Concerning the larger body of literature and the consequences of this paper in the field of study, there are several implications that prove to be of interest to the parties associated. Because the top-down approach is identified to lead the relationship between the United States and China, there are consequences involving the restoration of positive US-China relations. Both the United States and China are significant military, economic, and political powers that hold significant interest throughout the global system. As the world's first and second largest economies, conflict between the two nations have lasting impacts on the wider world. Greater pressure is cemented upon political figures on both sides to work amicably toward positive relations and to avoid any major world conflict, especially as tensions on the status of Taiwan, cybersecurity, business power, national interests, and espionage continue to plague the Sino-American relationship (Goldstein, 2020; Xu, 2024; Rolf & Schindler, 2023). As politicians continue on both sides to criticize the other in a fashion which undermines cooperation and goodwill politics, public favorability and opinion of the opposing side will likely continue to decline to new lows, which also reinforces the possibility of conflict. This holds true to not only the general public of both nations, but also military leaders, business analysts, economic advisors, and other important institutions that generate national and public information. A continuation of negative rhetoric in this top-down oriented approach also reinforces negative trends shown in media, contributing to greater "China Bashing" in the United States, and also a similar rebound effect of "U.S. Bashing" that could occur in China. Politicians and their teams should also note the effects of their speech or tone on the general public and the importance of managing specific rhetoric that targets audiences in a specific manner to influence their opinions. For other scientists in the field, there are several options that can be explored beyond the bounds of this paper. Further research is advised to confirm the accuracy of these results and carry further observations that could be applied to specific bilateral relationships across the world, or generalizations to apply toward entire political systems regarding the top-down and bottom-up split in the field. This paper also recommends further research that explores a larger Quantitative Content Analysis that pursues all textual materials within or beyond 2008-2018, especially if the ability of technology or AI could be harnessed in the process. This would allow an increase in accuracy and precision to confirm the results of this paper. Another route for future research could include the determination of whether trends observed in this paper continue to apply in the current decade, where the new U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping navigate a new era of tense Sino-American relations.

Conclusions

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the importance of rhetoric at the highest levels of government, especially between politicians of both the United States and China, in order to maintain healthy relations. The data also suggests that political rhetoric from both sides should be carefully chosen and inspected, as they will have lasting and consequential effects on public opinion and favorability between both sides, and cause lasting change to perceptions. While there is still further research needed to strengthen the evidence and accuracy of the data and conclusions presented in this paper, we can conclude that the Sino-American relationship is primarily dictated by a "top-down" approach on the American side, and is supported on the Chinese side as well.

Research Limitations and Notable Restrictions

The Researcher briefly addresses notable limitations in the research. Due to the pre-availability of transcripts for textual materials from the U.S. and China, this paper utilizes pre-transcribed materials from official government sites, media sources, and other credible locations. Rhetoric that was not already in transcript form and easily available was omitted from the research process, which could have had an impact on the results of the research. This omission of data could have led to differing results than if all rhetoric, including those orally delivered and non-transcribed, were

included in the sample data. This leads to another source of limitation in the research: sample size. Due to the limiting utilization of technology such as artificial intelligence in the analysis process, sample size had to be kept at the lowest possible while still maintaining accurate results. With twenty-three U.S. texts analyzed and thirteen Chinese texts, the sample size may have lowered the accuracy of the data in a way that would have an impact on the conclusions of the paper. Sample bias also needs to be taken into consideration. As the research was conducted in the United States, there was greater access to American materials compared to Chinese materials. This may have had an unintended effect and consequence on the data, where conclusions for the American side of the analysis were drawn from stronger correlated data, possibly owing to the greater accessibility of materials. This may have also accounted for the reasons that the Chinese data was ruled inconclusive for conclusions pertaining to the employment of a bottom-up or top-down approach.

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