COVID-19

large country
poor quality products
technologically advanced
no freedom of expression
large population
no human rights
mass production
made in China
Communism
one child policy
culture
rice
global power
no freedom
Great Wall
danger
overpopulation
technology
food
Uyghurs
dictatorship
pollution
cheap
exploitation
world factory
authoritarian
forgery
economy
industry
invasion
tradition
child labor

French public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19

Political distrust trumps economic opportunities

Marc Julienne | Richard Q. Turcsányi | Matej Šimalčík
Kristína Kironská | Renáta Sedláková

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Contents

Summary

- This report is a result of a wide-scale **study of public opinion on China in 13 European countries**,[1] conducted in September and October 2020, on the research sample representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.[2] Here, we focus on the **French portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.[3]

- Overall, the French public is **decisively negative about China:** 62% of those polled have a negative or very negative opinion, while only 16% have a positive or very positive view of China, the rest being neutral *(Figure 1)*. For a large majority of those surveyed, **this negative feeling has worsened over the past three years** *(Figure 2)*.

- China is **the second most negatively-perceived country** in France from those listed, just after North Korea, and followed by Russia, Israel, and the United States. On the contrary, **French public opinion is very positive** towards Germany, Japan, and the United-Kingdom, followed by Hong Kong and Vietnam *(Figure 3)*.

- **COVID-19 is by far the most common theme associated with China** by the French public in 2020, emphasizing the link between the pandemic and its country of origin. China is also often associated with "**dictatorship**", "**communism**" and "**authoritarian**", and various expressions related to the lack of human rights frequently come up. Although China is often regarded as the world's factory for cheap products, it is also associated with technology *(Figure 4)*.

- The French have prevailingly **negative views on all China-related issues** elicited in this survey, including **trade**, **investment**, or the **Belt and Road Initiative** (although 82% of those polled reported they were unaware of it), as well as the impact on the global environment, military power, and influence on democracies. The position of the French public on **the question of human rights is particularly clear**. Among the respondents, 74% consider the human rights situation in

China as ranging from "somewhat bad" to "very bad". **One third considers it to be "very bad"**. Only less than 7% think that the situation is good. In comparison with the EU, the USA, or Russia, the French public opinion views **the human rights situation in China as the worst** *(Figure 5)*.

- Notably, the **negative view of economic issues** makes France stand out when compared to the surveyed publics in other European countries. This general skepticism is mirrored by clear policy preferences: **the promotion of trade and investments scored as the least favored policy approach to take towards China**. Instead, the French public wants to **address cybersecurity risks**, followed by the policy preference to **cooperate on global issues** like climate change, epidemics, and counterterrorism, and to **advance human rights and democratic reforms** in China *(Figure 14)*.

- This does not imply that the French public does not recognize China's power. **China is seen as having the most economic strength,** ahead of the US, while the EU ranks only behind Russia in the eyes of the French public *(Figure 7)*. In addition, 55% of respondents consider China as important for France's economic development, although less so than the EU *(Figure 10)*.

- China is assessed to be the third military power, somewhat behind the US and Russia, but significantly ahead of the EU *(Figure 6)*. **On China's cultural attractiveness, the French respondents have divergent opinions**: 28% think it is unattractive, while roughly 45% believe it is attractive *(Figure 8)*.

- Overall, French **distrust towards China is very high,** even slightly higher than towards Russia *(Figure 11)*. The French public mostly believes its country's **foreign policy should be aligned with the EU**, rather than with the US, Russia, or China *(Figure 12)*. With regards to China specifically, although a large part of those surveyed does not have an opinion (43%), **most respondents think that France should be proactive vis-à-vis China**, either with its **own independent policy** (35%) or being **the leading country within the EU** (16%). Only 7% believe that France should follow the EU *(Figure 15)*.

- When asked about whom France should cooperate with on building the **5G network, 56% of respondents agree that France should rely on European stakeholders**, followed by 38% favoring cooperation with Japanese companies. Only 25% of respondents agree to cooperate with Chinese companies, fewer than with those of the US or South Korea *(Figure 13)*.

- Regarding **COVID-19**, although the French public mostly considers that the **greatest help to France came from the EU** (51%), **China is seen as the second country** France received assistance from, far ahead of the US and Russia *(Figure 16)*.

- Most people in France tend to think that **the virus naturally jumped to humans from animals** (38%) or that **it spread due to Chinese people eating bats and wild animals** (34%). Still, a fairly significant portion of respondents (28%) agrees with the statement that the "COVID-19 was artificially made in a Chinese laboratory and spread intentionally". Only 10% of respondents agree with the idea that the virus was brought to China by the US military *(Figure 17)*.

- Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on China, **very few respondents (8%) think that China's international reputation improved during the pandemic**, which may imply most of them believe the opposite. However, 30% of those surveyed estimate that China has gained economically from the outcomes of the pandemic *(Figure 17)*.

- Negative views of China are high in France regardless of political affiliation, suggesting that there is a high level of consensus on China in French politics *(Figure 18)*. Among voters from all political parties, the cumulative negative opinions ("very negative" and "negative") towards China **fluctuate between 58% and 69%.** Symmetrically, voters from all different parties who have a **positive feeling towards China are very few**, between 13% and 19%, with the slight exception of Les Républicains (right), which display the highest positive opinion of China at only 23%.

- This consensual view is confirmed also when we look at the 2017 presidential election: **there is no noticeable difference among voters**

of opposing candidates in their perception of China *(Figure 18)*. Among those who voted for the current president, Emmanuel Macron, 64% have a negative view of China, while among the voters of Marine Le Pen, they represent essentially the same share (63%). Similarly, considering those who have a positive opinion of China, they represent 18% of Marcon's support and 16% of Le Pen's.

1   Feelings towards China and other countries

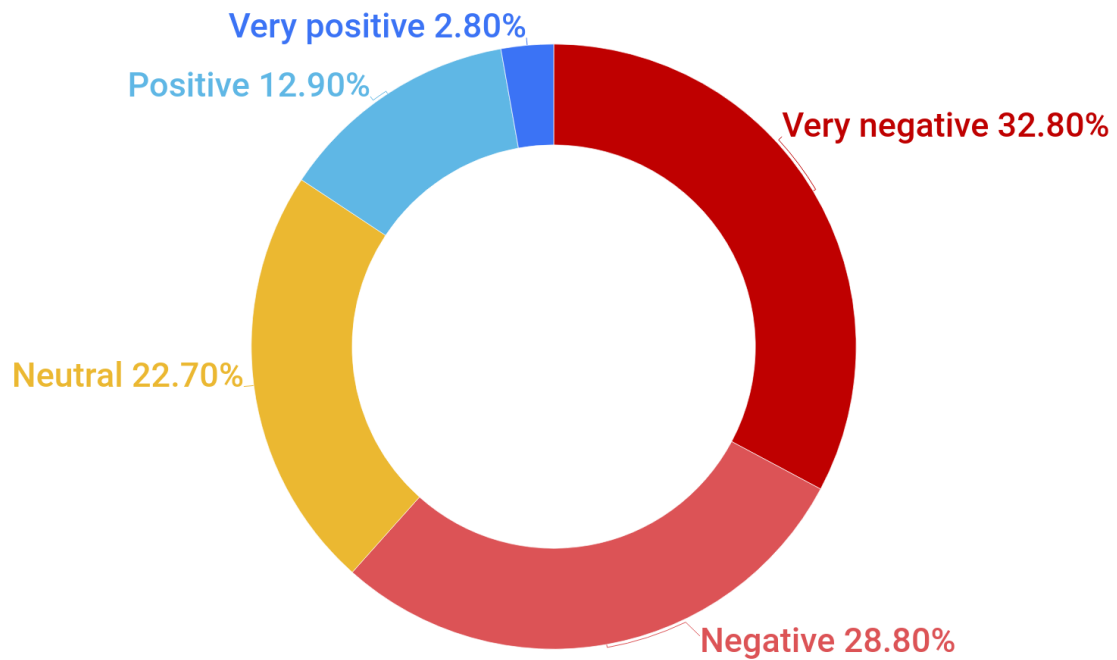**Figure 1:**   Feeling towards China among the French[4]

Very positive 2.80%
Positive 12.90%
Neutral 22.70%
Very negative 32.80%
Negative 28.80%

Figure 2:   Change of feeling towards China among the French in the past three years[5]

Improved 8.20%
Worsened 52.60%
Didn't change 39.20%
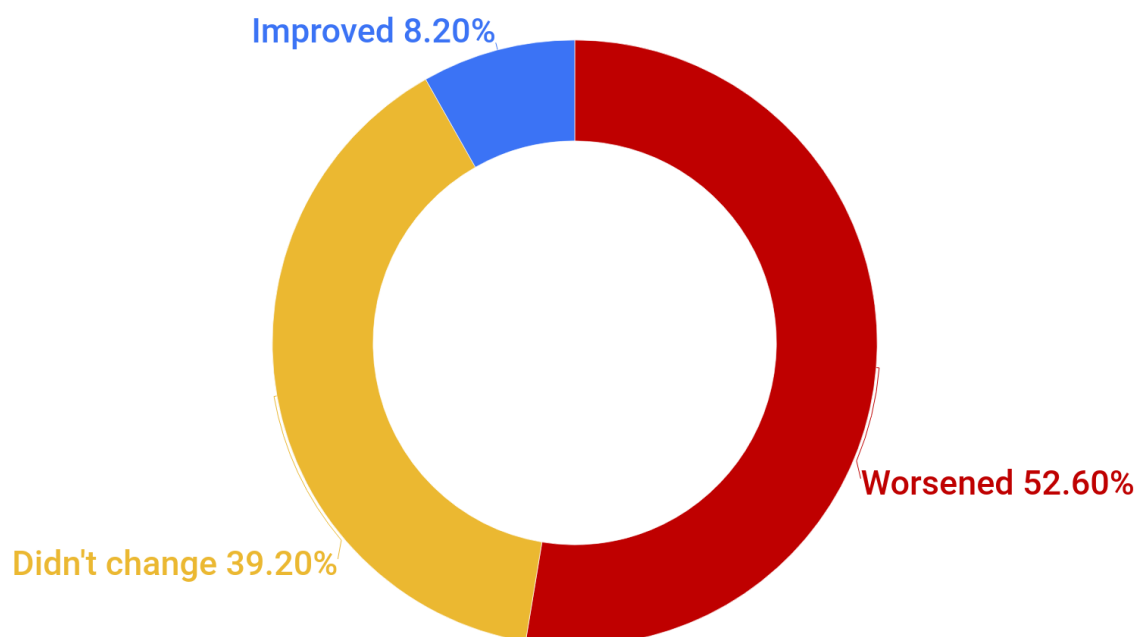
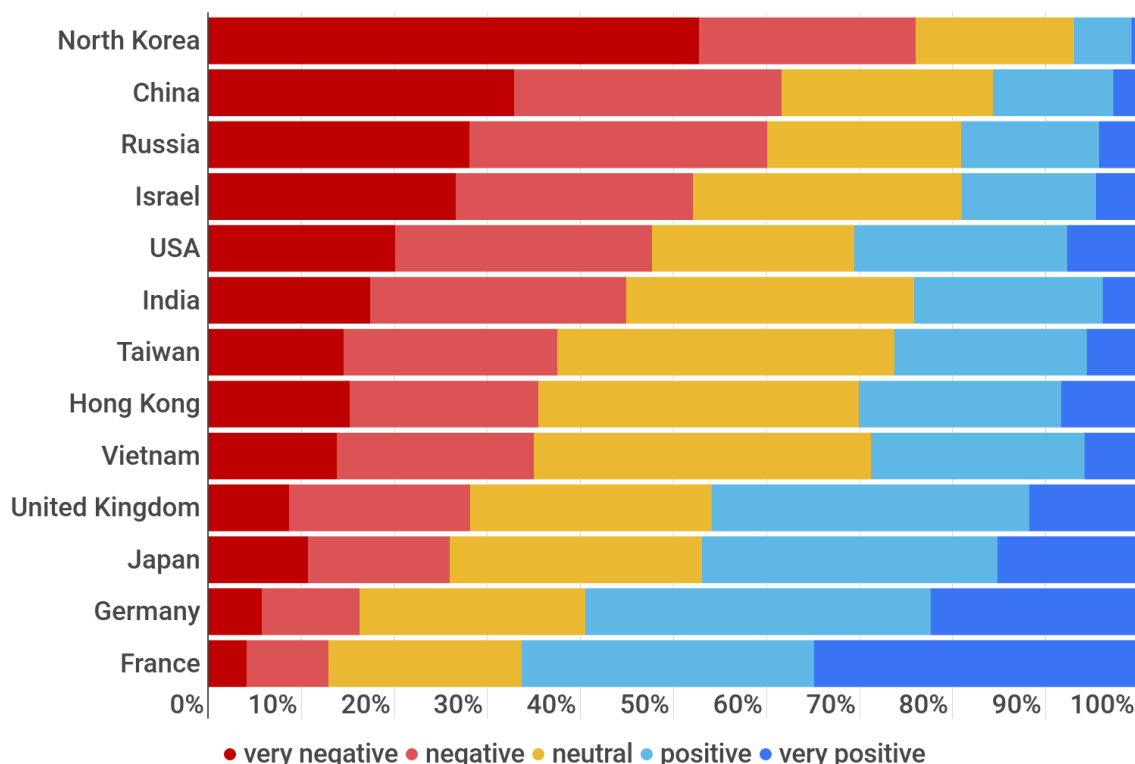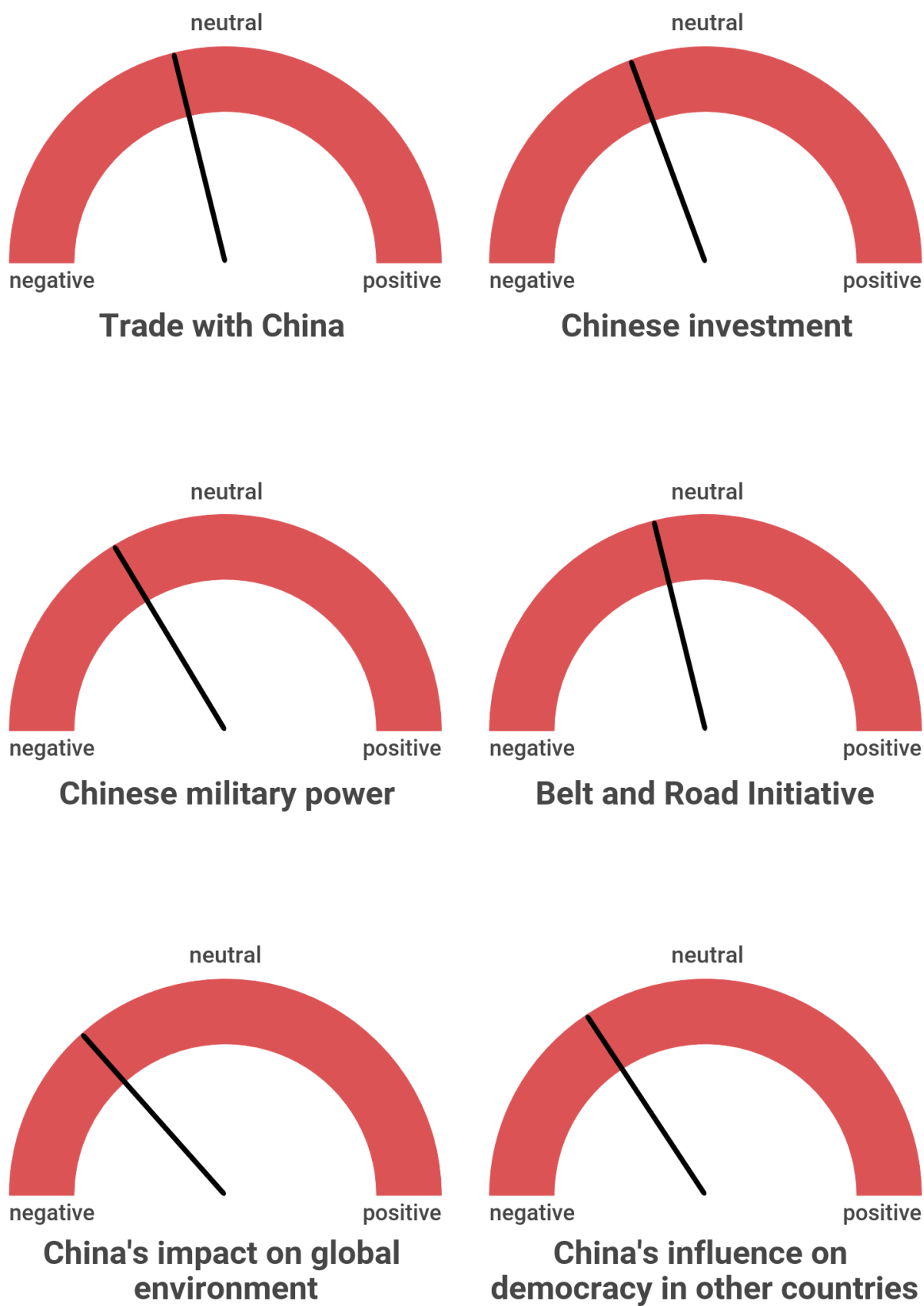**Figure 3:** Feeling towards select countries among the French[6]

Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?[7]

Figure 5: Perceptions of certain China-related issues among the French[8]

neutral

negative   positive

Trade with China

neutral

negative   positive

Chinese investment

neutral

negative   positive

Chinese military power

neutral

negative   positive

Belt and Road Initiative

neutral

negative   positive

China's impact on global environment

neutral

negative   positive

China's influence on democracy in other countries

2 Comparing the global powers

Figure 6: How militarily strong do you consider the following countries?

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● very weak ● weak ● somewhat weak ● neither ● somewhat strong ● strong ● very strong
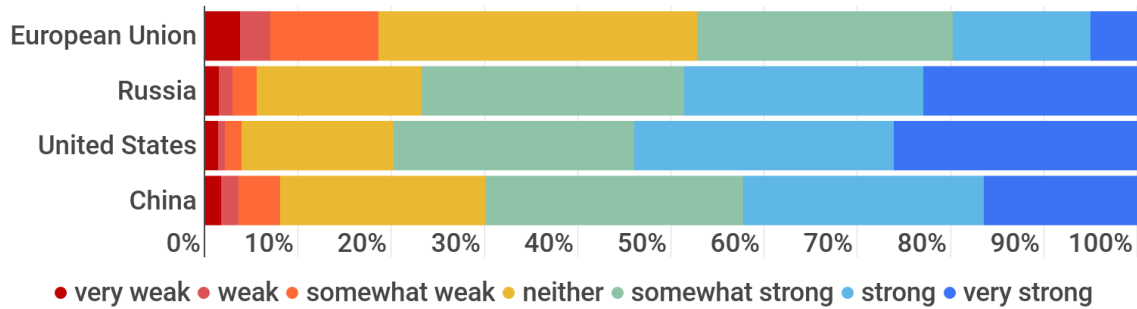
Figure 7: How economically strong do you consider the following countries?

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● very weak ● weak ● somewhat weak ● neither ● somewhat strong ● strong ● very strong
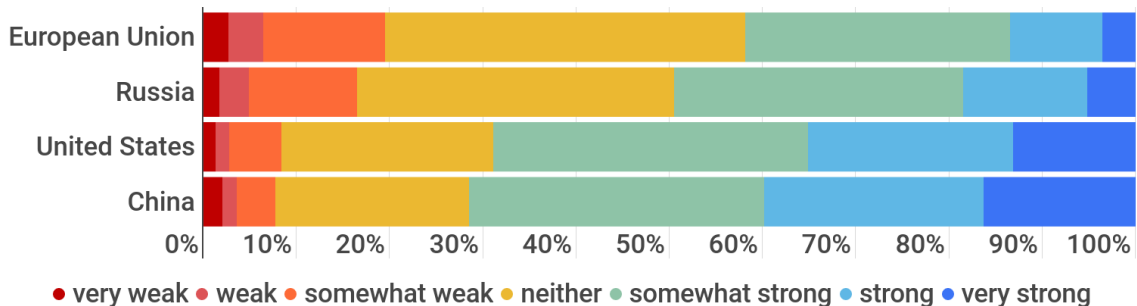
Figure 8: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries?

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● very unattractive ● unattractive ● somewhat unattractive ● neither ● somewhat attractive
● attractive ● very attractive
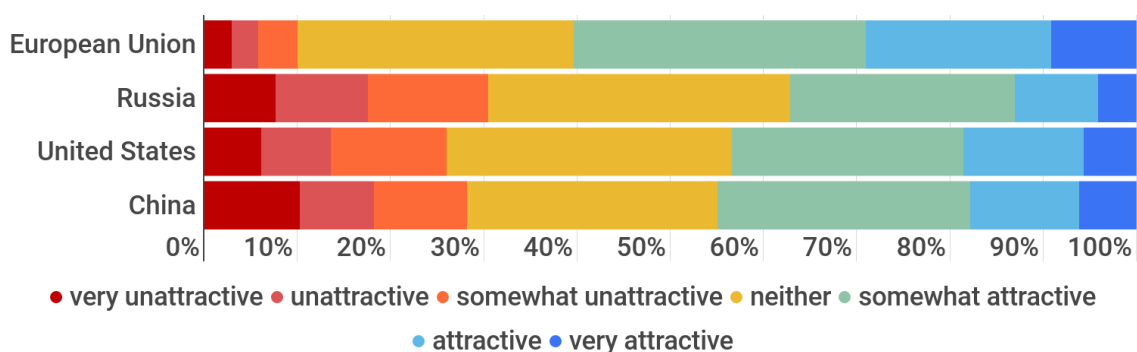
Figure 9: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries?

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● very bad ● bad ● somewhat bad ● neither ● somewhat good ● good ● very good
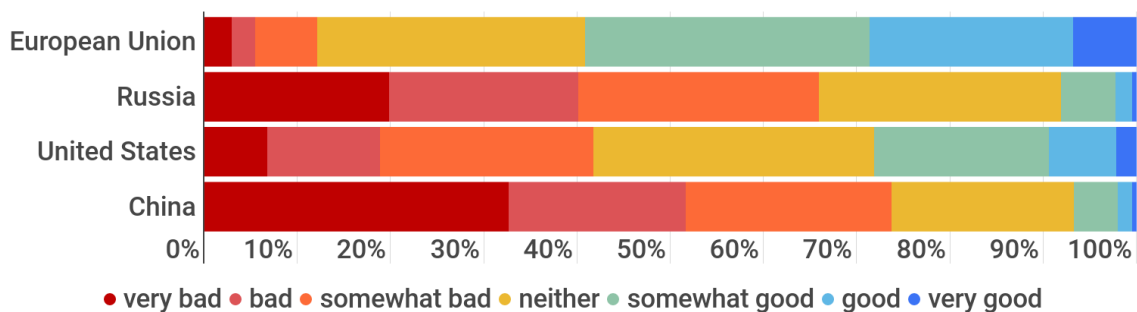
Figure 10: How important are the following countries to the economic development of France?

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● very unimportant ● unimportant ● somewhat unimportant ● neither ● somewhat important
● important ● very importnat
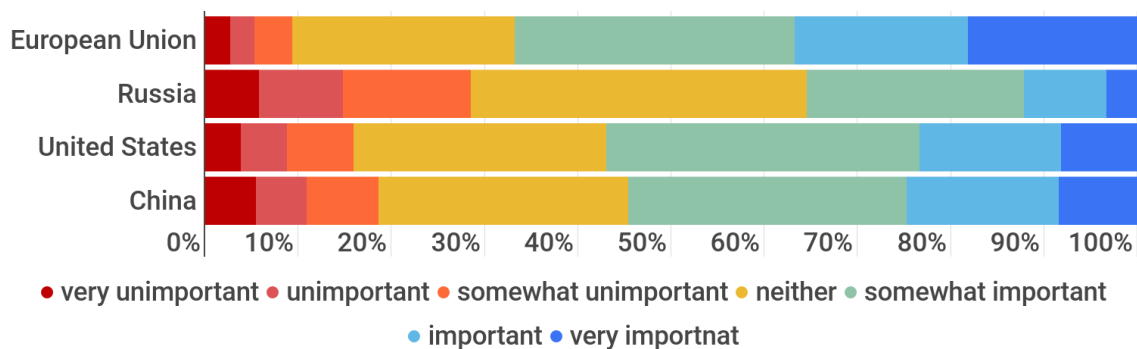
Figure 11: How much do you trust the following countries?

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● strongly distrust ● distrust ● somewhat distrust ● neither ● somewhat trust ● trust
● strongly trust
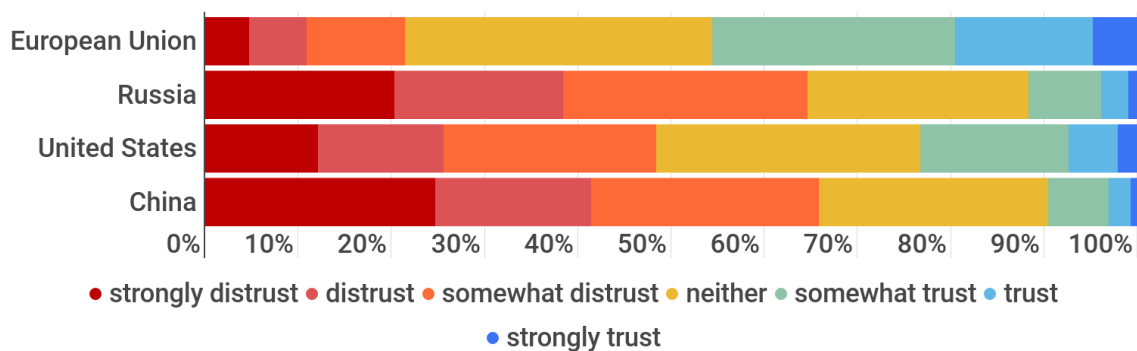
3 French foreign policy towards China

Figure 12: How closely should the French foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)[9]
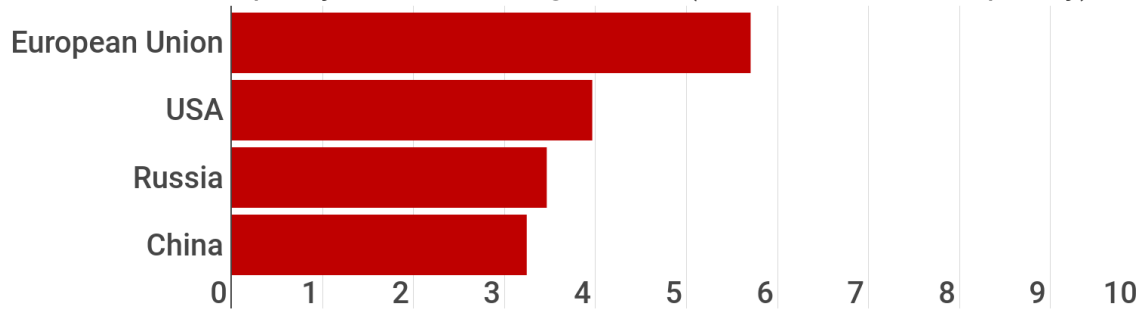

Figure 13: Should France cooperate with the following countries in building the 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)
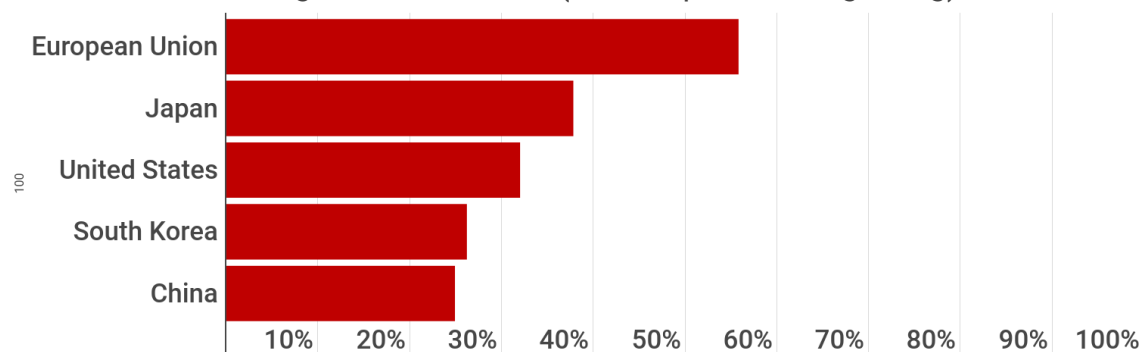

Figure 14: What should be the French foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)
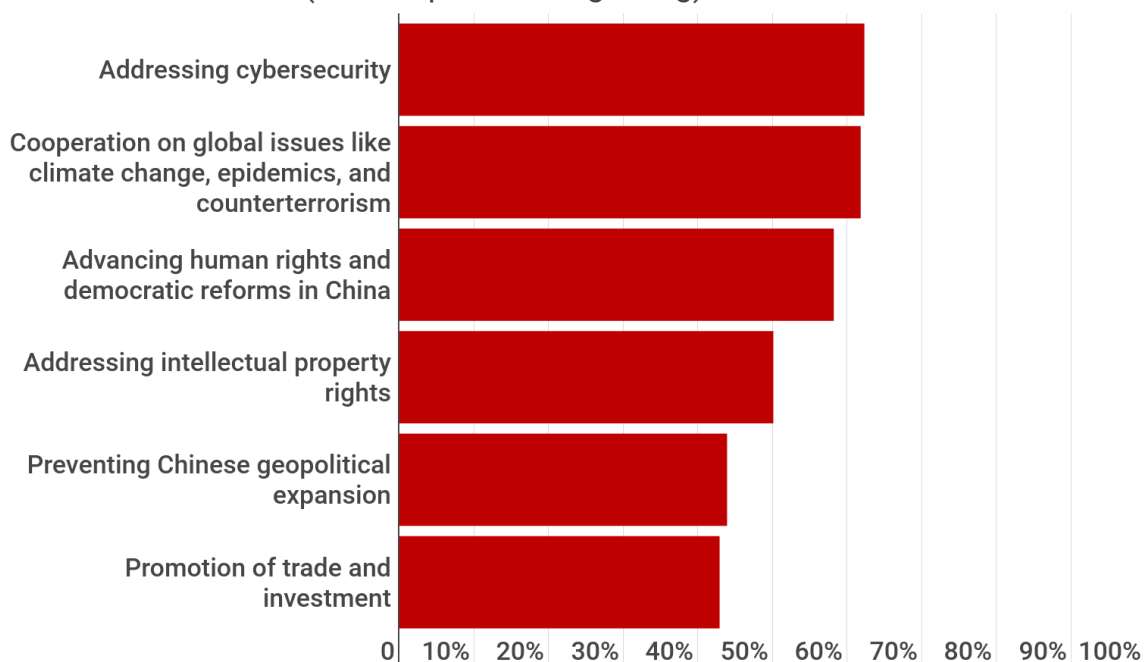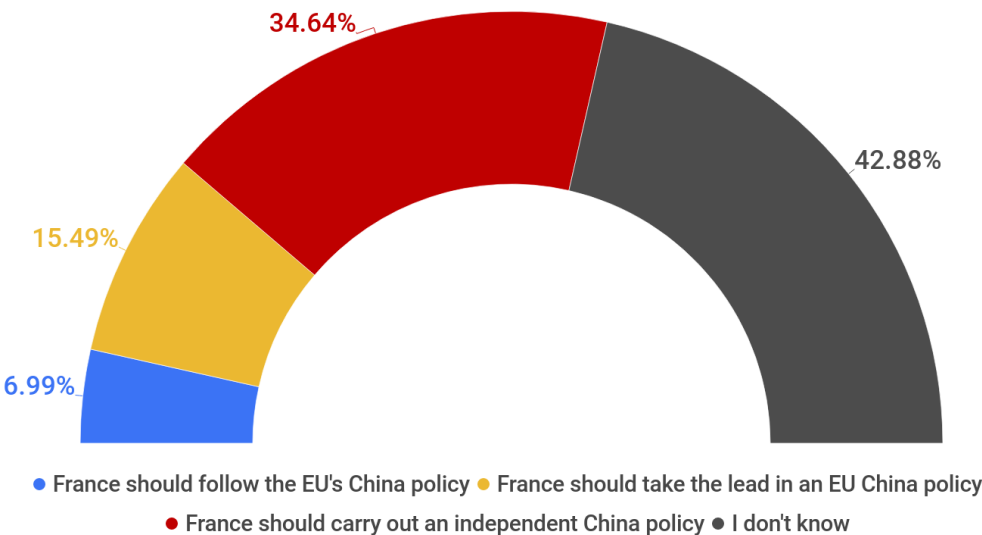
Figure 15: Should France pursue its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU China strategy?

- **34.64%**
- **42.88%**
- **15.49%**
- **6.99%**

● France should follow the EU's China policy ● France should take the lead in an EU China policy
● France should carry out an independent China policy ● I don't know

4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 16: How much did the following countries help France during the COVID-19 pandemic?[10]
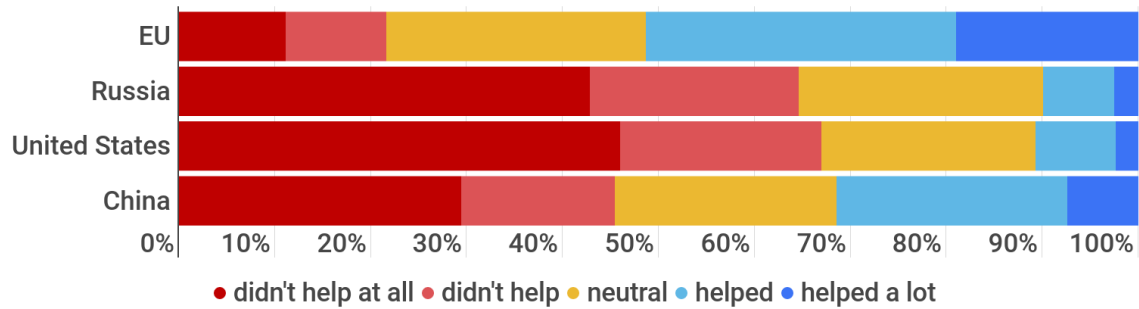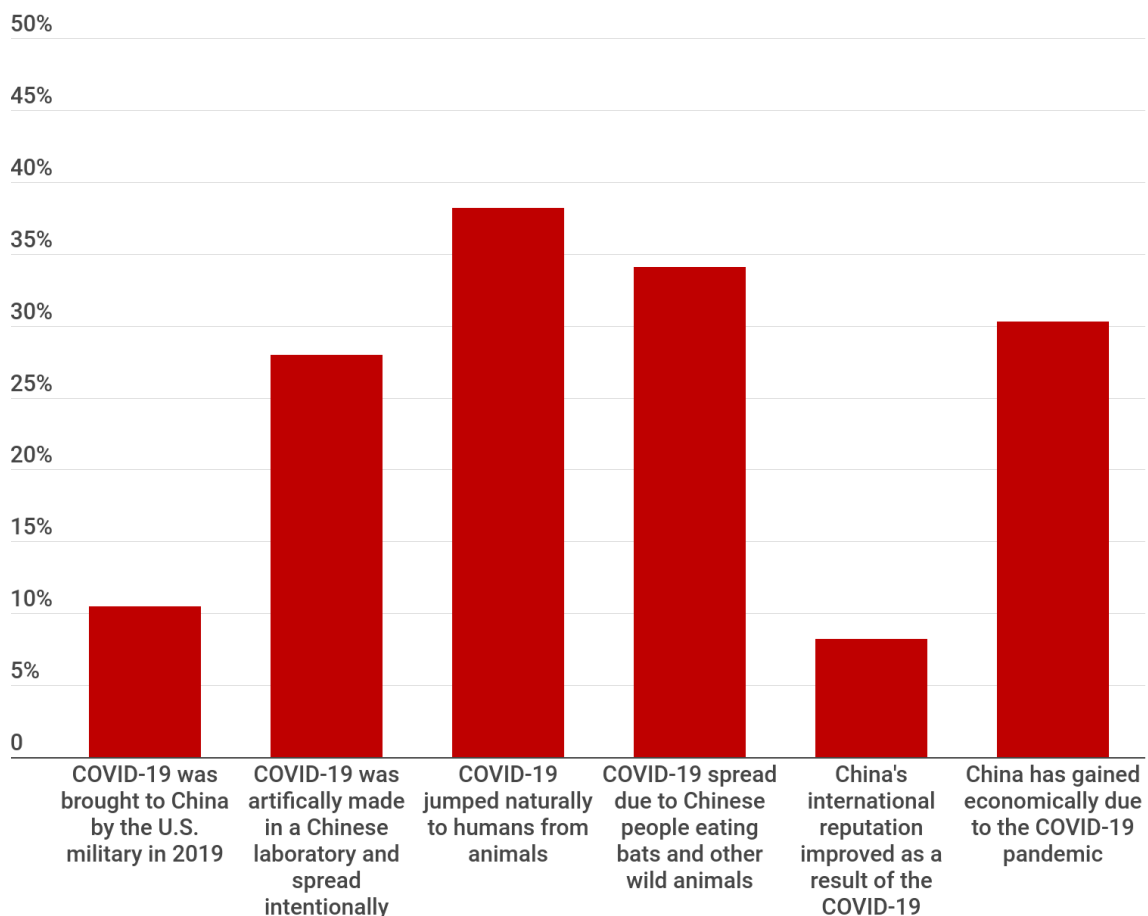

Figure 17: Views of the French on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)

5 Views of China & political affiliation

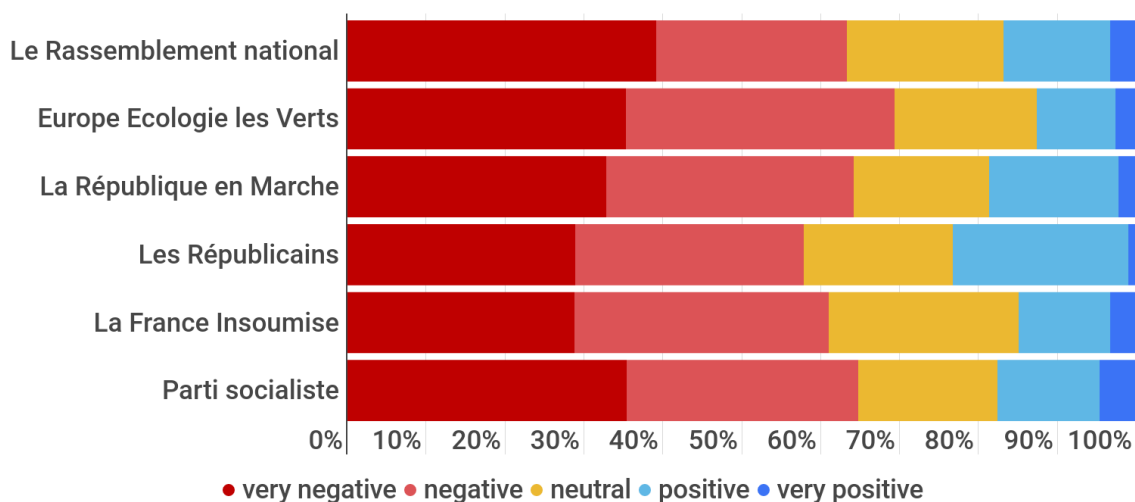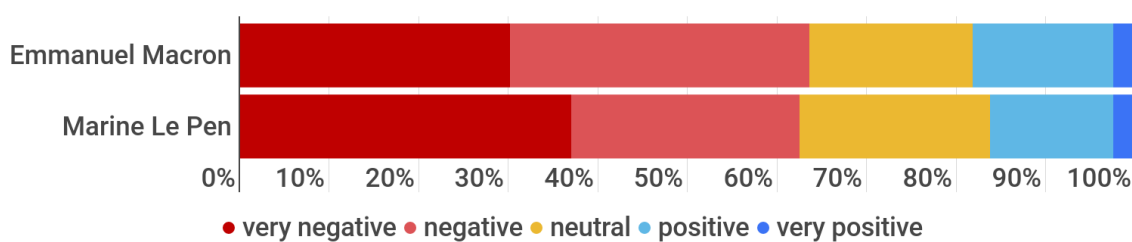**Figure 18:** Feelings towards China among voters of political parties polling over 5%[11]

Figure 19: Feelings towards China among voters of presidential candidates in the last presidential election[12]

Endnotes

1   Turcsanyi, Richard, Renata Sedlakova, Jiri Cenek, Kristina Kironska, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Marek Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Berzina Cherenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Bjorn Jerden, Marc Julienne, Tamas Matura, Tim Ruhlig, and Tim Summers. 2020. "Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey." Palacký University Olomouc. Preparation of the dataset has been supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project "Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges", CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

2   N = 1530; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the French population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, localization within the country, region, settlement density, and size of settlement. Data was collected online in September and October 2020.

3   Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Čenek, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Matej Hruška, Adrian Brona, Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Björn Jerdén, Marc Julienne, Tamás Matura, Tim Ruhlig, Tim Summers *(2020). European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Differences and common ground across the continent. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc*

4   Feelings towards China (and other countries have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as "negative" (incl. very negative: 0-20 and negative: 21-45), "neutral" (46-54) and "positive" (incl. positive: 55-79 and very positive: 80-100).

5   Respondents were offered 7 options: much worse; worse; slightly worse; neither worse nor better; slightly better; better; much better. "Worsened" includes options much worse; worse; slightly worse. "Did not change" includes option neither worse nor better. "Improved" includes options slightly better; better; much better.

6   Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis).

7   The respondents were asked an open-ended question "What first comes to mind when you hear about China?" The answers provided by 10 or more respondents are visualized.

8   Feelings towards the China-related issues have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each characteristic.

9   Desired foreign policy alignment has been measured on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each country.

10   Perceived COVID-19 help provided by the mentioned entities has been measured on a 0 (didn't help) to 10 (helped a lot) scale. The responses were grouped as "didn't help at all" (0-2), "didn't help" (3-4), "neutral" (5), "helped" (6-7), and "helped a lot" (8-10).

11   Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the political parties are as follows: Le Rassemblement national – 207, Europe Ecologie les Verts – 150, La République en Marche – 128, Les Républicains – 90, La France Insoumise – 87, Parti socialiste – 85.

12   Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the presidential candidates are: Emmanuel Macron – 505, Marine Le Pen – 357.

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The Sinophone Borderlands - Interaction at the Edges is an excellent research project based at the Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. The project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund, project no. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

The main idea of the project is to explore how the Chinese-speaking world interacts with other worlds, including those at its border (Slavophone, Tibetophone, Turco-Persophone, or Austroasiatophone worlds), as well as those who may be more distant (such as Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and others).

The Sinophone Borderlands research team consists of researchers from various disciplines under three main Research Groups - Political Science, Anthropology, and Linguistics. This allows for a cross-disciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural comparisons which pushes the academic studies of China and Asia beyond the limits of current disciplinary and national frameworks.

The Sinophone Borderlands is a research project that engages primarily in activities such as publishing academic journal articles, books, or participating in conferences and workshops.

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