

BOOK REVIEW

Benjamin I. Page and Tao Xie. *Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010. 232 pp. \$27.50 (cloth).

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Living with the Dragon seeks to explain “what Americans think and feel about China” and “why” (p. 2). Given that U.S.-China relations are the most important bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century, and that mutual misperceptions appear to contribute to their volatility, this is an extremely important topic.

Benjamin Page and Tao Xie explore American attitudes based upon a review of recent national opinion polls, with an emphasis on three Chicago Council for Global Affairs surveys from 2006 to 2008 that Page was involved in designing. They argue that (1) there is a *gap* between elite and popular views of China, with the former more hawkish than the latter; (2) the American public is *knowledgeable* about China; and (3) individual differences among Americans, such as *ideology*, have little impact on China attitudes. Their concluding policy prescriptions for the U.S. government include avoiding arms sales to Taiwan, and pushing Taiwan toward reunification with mainland China. These arguments about China attitudes are consistent with Page’s earlier work in *The Rational Public* (Page and Shapiro 1992) and *The Foreign Policy Disconnect* (Page and Bouton 2006) about the American public’s foreign-policy attitudes in general. The policy prescription on Taiwan is consistent with rhetoric from Beijing, where Xie, formerly Page’s graduate student at Northwestern University, now teaches.

None of these arguments is persuasive. Problems of data, analysis, and interpretation are widespread. Taken together, they raise the serious question of whether the survey data were used selectively to confirm preexisting arguments.

Perhaps the most alarming example comes from Page and Xie’s argument that American elites are more hawkish on China than the general public. Their primary evidence comes from a pair of Zogby surveys:

“in [their] . . . 2005 and 2007 studies . . . there were often substantial gaps between the views of the public and those of the leaders. In 2005, 36% of congressional staffers but only 15% of the public called China’s

emergence as a military power a ‘serious threat’ to the United States. A substantial 49% of congressional staffers, but only 24% of the general public, called China’s emergence as a global economic power a ‘serious threat’” (p. 113).

In an endnote, they claim that these gaps “declined” by 2007 (p. 163). A direct examination of the 2007 results (see www.survey.committee100.org/2007/files/C100SurveyFullReport.pdf, pp. 12, 29, and 30), however, reveals that elite and public responses to questions about Chinese power were virtually indistinguishable, with 19 percent of the elite and 22 percent of the public viewing China as a serious military threat, and 32 percent and 25 percent, respectively, viewing China as a serious economic threat. This is not a “decline,” but contradictory evidence. Why are the 2007 data misrepresented?

Even their key 2005 evidence of an elite/public attitudes gap does not hold up to closer scrutiny. While the public was surveyed in December 2004, the Congressional staffers were polled only three months later, in March 2005, immediately after China’s National People’s Congress passed its “Anti-Secession Law,” heightening military tensions across the Taiwan Strait—and likely temporarily heightening threat perception among Congressional staffers in Washington. Could Page and Xie have been unaware that this time effect undermined their argument?

In addition, these questions were insufficiently sensitive in their measurement of perceived threat. The four response options, “serious threat,” “potential threat,” “no threat,” and “ally,” are not mutually exclusive categories. For instance, a respondent might view China as a current “ally” but also as a “potential threat,” calling into question the meaning behind the responses they choose.

Page and Xie are also insufficiently sensitive to the impact of question wording on survey results. In the first chapter, they acknowledge that “Biased or one-sided questions do produce biased responses” (p. 10). However, they immediately reassure the reader that “If a question is not flagged as tendentious or leading, the reader can be confident that we have judged it to be sound” (p. 10). They further maintain that, through the “miracle of aggregation” measurement error at the individual level corrects itself at the full sample level, revealing the “real central tendencies of opinion” (p. 6).

The “miracle of aggregation” works only when the sources of error are random and not systematic, however. Wording problems introduce systematic measurement bias that can consistently inflate or deflate average scores. Despite their reassurances, *Living with the Dragon* is rife with question wording issues not flagged by the authors. For instance, the 2006 and 2008 Chicago Council surveys that Page helped design included the policy question “Do you think the U.S. should undertake *friendly* cooperation and engagement with China, or actively work to limit the growth of China’s power?” (p. 66, italics added). Based

on responses to this question, Page and Xie conclude that “about two-thirds of Americans favor cooperation and peaceful engagement with China, rather than actively working to limit China’s rise” (p. 67). Is this conclusion warranted? Because people are motivated to see themselves and the groups to which they belong (such as “the U.S.”) in a positive light, “friendly” likely introduced systematic measurement bias, inflating the percentages of those choosing “cooperation.”

More broadly, Page and Xie tend toward what Howard Schuman (2008) calls “survey fundamentalism” or the “referendum point of view,” treating single-variable marginals as literally representative of public opinion. There is little attention to context effects and the “interpretive survey research” approach that Schuman has so thoughtfully advocated.

For instance, Page and Xie argue that Americans are knowledgeable about China. Lacking a systematic battery of questions designed to directly measure knowledge, they rely upon individual questions scattered among many surveys. But their interpretations are often questionable. For instance, based on responses to a 2008 Chicago Council question, they write that “40% of Americans . . . recognized that China loans more money to the United States” than vice versa (p. 20). They then conclude that “most Americans’ [*sic*] perceive China’s economic rise fairly clearly” (p. 40). Page and Xie do not mention that there were only three response options; 40 percent correct is thus not much better than pure chance, or 33 percent. Is this persuasive evidence that Americans are knowledgeable about China?

Page and Xie also repeatedly assert that demographics and individual differences like ideology have little impact on China attitudes (e.g., pp. 37, 57, 66, and 103). This claim is consistent with Page’s earlier argument (Page and Bouton 2006, pp. 95–96) that ideology has a “limited effect” on foreign policy attitudes in general. However, the China data do not support their argument.

First and foremost, the type of data Page and Xie use is not well suited to address this issue. National opinion polls are designed to uncover temporal changes in substantive opinions about discrete policy issues over time; they are not designed to tap deeper attitudes and emotions. Measurement theorists have demonstrated that the reliability of psychological and attitudinal measures (like ideology) tends to be lower when there are fewer items utilized to measure a construct (see Osterlind 2006). The use of single-questions to measure attitudes can therefore be problematic. Furthermore, restricted response categories (such as binary choices between China as a “partner” vs. a “rival,” or “engaging” vs. “containing” China) do not allow variables to vary enough. High measurement error and insufficient variation both typically attenuate observed correlations between variables.

A consistent pattern of correlations between ideology and China attitudes is nonetheless apparent in the Chicago Council data. In the 2006 dataset, greater levels of conservatism are associated with less positive feelings about China

($r = -.11$), lower levels of trust ($r = -.14$), less endorsement of the “partners” designation ($r = -.06$), and greater support for “containment” ($r = .16$). Furthermore, these correlations would likely have been larger had they not been attenuated by measurement error and variables that generally lacked much variation.

Page and Xie, however, make a surprising statistical choice that weakens even this small correlation between ideology and China attitudes: “to get at causation . . . we conducted . . . regression analyses” (p. 34). Specifically, ideology and party identification were included together as predictors in a series of five simultaneous multiple regressions (displayed in appendix 2, pp. 125–31). First, such regressions cannot demonstrate causality; they can at most demonstrate correlations. Second, by running ideology and party identification together, the problem of multicollinearity is introduced. In the 2006 Chicago Council data, conservatism and party identification correlated at $r = .45$. Because this substantial overlapping variation reduces the unique predictive power of each variable when regressed simultaneously, it is little wonder that Page and Xie found that ideology had “little impact.”

The correlations reported above, however, appear to support the counterargument (e.g., Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2007) that there are partisan cleavages in foreign-policy attitudes. Indeed, it may just be that in the absence of much knowledge about China, ideology fills in the gaps, allowing Americans to form and maintain coherent if partisan attitudes toward China.

Finally, Page and Xie’s analysis of the Taiwan issue is troubling. First, they claim that “the United States has apparently made an open-ended commitment to the military defense of Taiwan” (p. 113). I respectfully disagree. Page and Xie are correct that President Bush did say—once—that the U.S. would do “whatever it took” to defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack. They do not mention, however, that he said this in the context of the heated emotions surrounding the spy-plane collision of April 2001. More importantly, the Bush administration stuck to the “One-China policy,” with Bush himself publicly pressuring the Chen Shui-bian administration in Taiwan to back off its more reckless pro-independence initiatives. Page and Xie’s claim takes a single fact (a presidential gaffe) out of context and overgeneralizes from it.

Second, Page and Xie suggest that the U.S. government should “avoid . . . provocative arms sales to Taiwan . . . and perhaps gently nudge the Taiwanese towards peaceful integration with the mainland” (p. 120). This policy prescription does not follow from the survey results presented in the book, and violates the Taiwan Relations Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1979. It also raises a normative issue: On what moral basis can we ask the 23 million people of Taiwan to jeopardize their hard-earned democracy?

In sum, although *Living with the Dragon* addresses the important topic of American views of China, the evidence that Page and Xie present does not support what appear to have been their preexisting arguments and policy preferences. Further research on the content and determinants of American attitudes

toward China is still needed. Although the existing polling data have serious limitations due to problems of question wording and design, a careful inductive interpretation of polling results to date could still yield some insight into what Americans think and feel about China. New surveys and experiments are still needed, however, that pay greater attention to issues of measurement. Experiments designed to address the question of why Americans hold the attitudes they do would be particularly welcome.

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