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DEALING WITH A RESURGENT CHINA

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Between Pragmatism and Nationalism: Chinese Online Discourses on the EU

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Key findings

- **The EU faces a fragmented identity in Chinese digital discourse.** Chinese internet users view the EU through three competing lenses: as a valuable economic partner and standard-setter, as a dependent follower of U.S. foreign policy, and as a moralistic critic of Chinese values. This fragmented image undermines the EU's ability to communicate coherently with Chinese audiences.

- **Pragmatic interests dominate until nationalist triggers activate.** Discussions about China-EU trade, technology standards, and technology cooperation remain largely rational and benefit-focused. However, mentions of human rights, Xinjiang, or freedom of expression quickly escalate into emotional, nationalist confrontations that shut down constructive dialogue. This pattern requires focusing engagement on practical cooperation areas while developing fact-based, multilingual communication strategies for sensitive issues.

- **The EU lacks digital visibility and strategic narrative coherence.** Chinese users often discuss individual European countries rather than the EU as a unified actor. During major international crises, the EU appears strategically weak and indecisive, reinforcing perceptions of European irrelevance in global affairs.

- **Online opinion is shaped by multiple actors beyond genuine public sentiment.** State media define the main topics and narratives; platform algorithms amplify emotionally charged or nationalist content to drive engagement; and users often practice self-censorship to avoid sensitive topics. Together, these factors create what can be described as a "permitted discourse", a space where expression is possible but carefully constrained. The EU should therefore draw on multiple sources and use Chinese-language social media monitoring tools to track emotional cycles and better understand shifting public moods.

- **Nuanced communication strategies are needed to build long-term relationship resilience.** It is essential to strategically manage the time-sensitive nature of communication, avoiding inflammatory periods. The EU needs crisis communication protocols that maintain dialogue during periods of political tension or disputes. The goal is not to "win" Chinese internet opinion but to create a more informed, nuanced understanding that can support stable long-term relations even amid political disagreements.

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1.Introduction: Public opinion as a strategic factor

As geopolitical competition intensifies and digital connections grow worldwide, Chinese public sentiment, especially as expressed on social media, has become a strategic factor that the EU cannot afford to ignore in its engagement with China. Despite the constraints of censorship, social media still offers valuable insights into how the Chinese public receives and reshapes official narratives, attitudes, and ideological trends. Digital conversations increasingly influence the political environment where diplomacy, economic cooperation, and policy dialogue occur.

While online narratives may not directly dictate foreign policy, but they can both legitimize policy adjustments and constrain government actions in China. When public sentiment aligns with nationalist positions, state media often amplifies these voices, using the appearance of "social consensus" to justify stronger measures. Conversely, when online opposition grows too strong, the government may be forced to step in, either to calm public anger or to redirect attention elsewhere.

This dynamic creates two key challenges for the EU. First, overlooking Chinese online narratives risks misjudging the political costs and symbolic impact of EU actions in China. As later case studies demonstrate, even the EU's statements on science and technology are frequently reinterpreted by Chinese internet users as either hostile gestures or signs of appeasement towards the United States. Second, during a crisis, online opinions can amplify tensions, fuel outrage, mobilize digital protests, trigger consumer boycotts, or even influence state-level responses. In recent years, Chinese public reactions to perceived "insults to China" have repeatedly caused significant commercial consequences.

Monitoring, understanding, and, where possible, engaging with these digital dynamics can help the EU communicate more effectively while reducing its vulnerability to disinformation. The EU should also recognize that its "soft power" in China has weakened amid rapid economic growth and rising nationalism. Yet it still retains a degree of attraction in several areas, including higher education, environmental policy, welfare systems, labor protections, and everyday lifestyles. These elements of the "European way of life" continue to resonate with younger, urban, and globally minded Chinese audiences. Leveraging these themes could open new opportunities for public diplomacy and people-to-people engagement.

In short, the EU needs a deeper understanding of Chinese online opinion. It shapes how EU-China relations are perceived, influences trust and legitimacy, and can either worsen or ease diplomatic tensions. Ongoing monitoring, careful analysis, and proactive engagement should therefore form an important part of the EU's China strategy.

2. Methodology & Limitations

This study is based on systematic observation and thematic analysis of EU-related discussions on major Chinese social media platforms. The goal is to understand how

Chinese internet users perceive the EU, its policies, and its actions.

2.1 Data sources and Platform selection

The policy brief examines five representative Chinese social media platforms and channels. Each platform targets different user groups, encourages distinct narrative styles, and relies on unique content circulation mechanisms. While none of them can fully represent the entirety of "Chinese internet users," each provides valuable insights into how specific social groups understand and engage with the EU.

(1) **Weibo.** Often compared to Twitter, Weibo is fast-moving and wide-reaching, with trending hashtags that can quickly turn issues into national debates. EU-related topics typically emerge alongside news events or official statements. Weibo's open environment provides crucial insights into how official messaging interacts with grassroots sentiment. Its "trending topic list (热搜榜单 *resou bangdan*)", though controlled by the platform, still reflects public attention, and the very act of content filtering itself reveals how public attention can be guided or reshaped.

Notably, Weibo is also the only Chinese social media platform where the EU maintains an official account, "EU in China" (@欧盟在中国 *oumeng zai zhongguo*). Since its registration in 2011, this account has become a crucial channel for the EU's digital diplomacy. This unique status makes Weibo especially important for this study: it is not only where Chinese internet users engage in highly visible debates about the EU, but also where the EU itself actively communicates with the Chinese public.

(2) *Douyin* (TikTok China). Driven by algorithmic recommendations, Douyin is a major arena for emotional mobilization and viral dissemination. Popular EU-related videos often feature visually striking or emotionally charged content, such as street protests, clashes, or migration issues, which easily fuel nationalist or security concerns. With its fragmented, fast-paced updates, Douyin is key to observing grassroots emotions and how emotions spread online.

(3) *Xiaohongshu* (RedNote). With a core user base of urban middle-class women, *Xiaohongshu* focuses on lifestyle content and consumer experiences. The EU's image on this platform emerges through travel guides, study-abroad experiences, fashion, and cultural encounters. In early 2025, *Xiaohongshu* gained global attention during the so-called "TikTok refugee" incident, when users worried about a potential TikTok ban in the United States began migrating to *Xiaohongshu* and humorously referred to themselves as "refugees." The episode quickly went viral, drawing media coverage in both China and abroad. It revealed how a platform primarily known for lifestyle and consumer content could suddenly become a space for geopolitical conversation and cultural exchange. The incident also underscored *Xiaohongshu*'s expanding international visibility and its emerging role in shaping global perceptions of Chinese digital culture.

(4) **WeChat Official Accounts.** The content ecosystem of WeChat Official Accounts is highly diverse. It features systematic, in-depth policy analyses, discussions on international relations, and current affairs commentary. Such content tends to be

more rational and academic, offering insights into how elites and policy-focused groups view the EU. However, many articles are more entertaining or sensational, using clickbait headlines, emotional language, or exaggerated narratives to attract attention and shares. This type of content circulates through WeChat Moments, group chats, and account networks, making it less publicly visible than Weibo discussions but often more deeply embedded in users' social circles. WeChat Official Accounts therefore serve both as both a window into rational, policy debates and a reflection of broader social sentiments. Its distribution within the WeChat ecosystem,[1] creates a unique "semi-private, semi-public" sphere of discourse, meaning the same topic may be framed completely differently across various accounts and user communities.

(5) **Official Media Accounts.** Across all platforms, state media outlets and major news portals play a central role in shaping the overall image of the EU in China. They serve as both primary information sources and narrative gatekeepers. When the EU passes China-related legislation, for example, state media often launches concentrated coverage that amplifies across multiple platforms, creating the widest possible online discussion. Official media thus directly influences public opinion while indirectly steering broader online conversations.

2.2 Timeframe and Topic Selection

The analysis covers data from 2023 through the first half of 2025, focusing on the following EU-related themes:

- EU-China policy issues (e.g., human rights, sanctions, values);

- Trade and technology relations (e.g., EU standards, the China-EU investment agreement, digital sovereignty);

- Educational and cultural exchange (particularly study abroad and university cooperation);

- The EU's role in major international events (e.g., climate action, Russia-Ukraine war, Gaza war)

- The EU's image in global governance (e.g., U.S.-China competition)

2.3 Methods and Limitations

This study uses thematic analysis and qualitative content review of posts, comments, bullet chats, and trending topics across platforms. By identifying recurring narrative frames, keywords, and emotional expressions, the study traces how public sentiment around the EU develops and spreads. On some platforms, keyword searches (such as "EU," "European standards," "human rights," "European lifestyle") were combined

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[1] WeChat (微信 *weixin*) is an instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app developed by Tencent.

with trending topics lists and algorithmic recommendations to capture representative cases.

This research does not rely on large-scale web scraping or quantitative modeling. The goal is not to calculate precise opinion percentages but rather to identify key features of online discourse and how it interacts with official narratives, particularly focusing on emotional language in sensitive debates.

That said, several limitations must be acknowledged:

(1) **Censorship and Self-Censorship.** Chinese social media content faces varying degrees of state censorship. Discussions touching on sensitive issues may be deleted or down-ranked. Users also engage in self-censorship, avoiding potentially risky political statements. Therefore, findings reflect "permitted discourse" rather than the full spectrum of opinions.

(2) **Algorithmic Amplification.** Platform algorithms reinforce the "filter bubble" effect: emotional or sensational content gets recommended and shared more often, while rational, minority, or academic voices are often marginalized. This means that the intensity and direction of observed debates do not necessarily represent the actual distribution of user opinions, but are shaped by algorithmic amplification.

(3) **Rapid Opinion Changes.** Social media conversations shift rapidly. Hot topics may last only days or hours. Public attitudes toward the EU can fluctuate quickly in response to international events, media framing, or diplomatic disputes, often showing strong emotional and temporary swings, making analysis highly time-sensitive.

This research illuminates major trends and dynamics in Chinese online discussions about the EU. However, its representativeness and stability must be interpreted with caution. **Policymakers should view these findings as a way to monitor "public sentiment signals" rather than as direct reflections of broader Chinese social perceptions.**

3. How the EU is discussed in Chinese online spaces

Chinese internet users' discussions of the EU across multiple topics, ranging from economics and technology to social values and political systems. To present this complexity clearly, this study organizes the analysis thematically, examining different EU images in Chinese online discourse and the logics behind them.

3.1 EU standards and Regulatory power

On Chinese social media, the EU is often portrayed as a "standard setter." Its regulations and legal frameworks are seen as having both direct and indirect impacts on China. This role generates mixed recognition and criticism.

3.1.1 High standards as market access vs. Protectionism as hidden barriers

For some internet users and professional groups, EU standards, particularly in technology and environmental protection, are regarded as **a "passport" to enter high-end global markets.** In discussions about electric vehicles and battery industries, many users mention the "EU carbon emission standards" or "battery recycling requirements." They argue that while these rules are strict, they push Chinese companies to upgrade technology and accelerate green transitions, thereby strengthening competitiveness. In food safety and consumer products, EU standards are often seen as symbols of strictness and safety. In discussions on *Xiaohongshu* about European dairy products and cosmetics, users generally emphasize the trust that comes with "EU certification." Domestic brands, in turn, market themselves by highlighting compliance with EU standards. One popular post called the EU a "rule enforcer" and a "teacher," praising its regulatory role.[2] Comments echoed this sentiment, with one user writing:

> "Regulation is important. Sometimes I feel Europe's economy is weak, but from a long-term perspective, like in a sci-fi scenario where aliens invade, or centuries from now, people might find that only Europe was practicing true sustainability. Without EU standards on things like the environment and data privacy, life could be disastrous for ordinary people. The U.S. and China fight to make money, but EU laws actually protect individuals." [3]

At the same time, many internet users criticize EU standards protectionism, especially when they affect Chinese exports. A Weibo post on non-tariff barriers listed examples such as textiles, electric vehicles, lighters, and foie gras:

> "An EV powered by coal-based electricity is ruled 'non-green.' You think this is environmental policy? Guess what: European EVs made in China and re-exported to Europe enjoy tariff exemptions. … The EU required Chinese foie gras producers to prove they did not use forced feeding, but French producers at home continued the traditional practice." [4]

Comments ranged from sarcastic ("The only good thing Brussels ever did was unify phone charging ports") to supportive:

> "Manufacturing quality in Europe is much better than that in the US. Mercedes S-Class and BMW 7-Series are far superior to F-150 pickup trucks. Airbus, Leica cameras, Miele washing machines, Sebamed shower gel, Lego toys, Wolford stockings, Italian leather shoes and clothing all have excellent quality. But they are produced in limited quantities and are expensive, so they primarily target the luxury market." [5]

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[2] See the post at: https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/676aac29000000001301aaad?xsec_token=ABa_fm0G__3UM6g9x0T98-Kzjv1HyrwNQUBfFM4JJTnMU=&xsec_source=pc_search&source=web_explore_feed. 24 December, 2024, Last access: 22 May, 2025.
[3] Ibid.
[4] See the post at: https://weibo.com/1687813073/Ptc7uF2zN , 23 May, 2025. Last access: 25 August, 2025.
[5] See the comment section of the post at: https://weibo.com/1687813073/Ptc7uF2zN , 23 May, 2025. Last access: 25 August, 2025.

This defense of European quality, however, immediately drew pushback: "Luxury goods are a niche market. Why should the EU set standards for everyday products used by the masses? Does that make sense?" [6]

3.1.2 Systemic comparison and nationalist sentiment

Resistance to the EU's rule-setting role often intertwines with nationalist emotions and amplifies in specific cases. Internet users are not only concerned about the EU's rules in themselves but also about how these rules compare with China's position in global development, which leads to complex emotional reactions.

For example, the EU's restrictions on Huawei's 5G technology have been a major debate topic. On Chinese social media, these moves are often framed as "the West jointly suppressing China's tech rise." Since Huawei has been cast in official and media narratives as a symbol of China's technological strength, **many internet users see EU restrictions as both an insult to the national image and hostility toward China's broader development.** The notion of "politicized technical standards" became a hot topic, reinforcing the perception that EU regulations are essentially hidden barriers, fueling distrust toward the EU.

Another example came in 2023, when the EU passed the *Regulation on Prohibiting Products Made with Forced Labor from Entering the EU Market.* On Chinese social media, this sparked intense debate. Many people posted to thank the EU for "giving them more rest time." Some joked that "Chinese trade unions are in Europe."[7] For a time, posts about the decline of Chinese overtime culture were flooded with comments like "Thanks, EU."

In response, Guancha.cn, an influential online media portal, published an article titled "EU Helping Fix China's Work Culture? Don't Give Them Too Much Credit," arguing that the regulation was a strategic move targeting China.[8] Others echoed that the measure was essentially a new trade barrier under the banner of human rights, specifically aimed at Xinjiang products, reviving nationalist debates and criticism of the EU.

> *The EU's image as a "standard setter" in Chinese online discourse is marked by duality: it represents both quality and advanced governance, and a hidden barrier and a politicized tool. This ambivalence shapes Chinese internet users' attitudes toward the EU, producing both admiration and resistance.*

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[6] Ibid.
[7] See the comment section of the post at: https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6789e29e000000001b00af34?xsec_token=ABg-j4POA7bq4lkgDrdBJjvJ0NwojfCcF61XFxelldTXg=&xsec_source=pc_search&source=web_explore_feed, 16 February, 2025. Last access: 22 May, 2025.
[8] Kui,S. (2025). "EU Helping Fix China's Work Culture? Don't Give Them Too Much Credit." 欧盟帮忙整顿中国职场？别把他们想得太好了, Guancha.cn, 观察者网, 28 March,2025.

3.2 The EU's position in the context of China-U.S. relations

In Chinese online discussions, debates about the EU are rarely isolated: they are **always placed within the framework of U.S.-China competition.** The EU is frequently described as a "third pole" between China and the United States. Yet this positioning carries two sharply contrasting interpretations.

3.2.1 Criticism of "Following the U.S."

On issues such as Xinjiang, human rights, and freedom of expression, internet users often argue that the EU merely "follows America's lead," lacking genuine independence. A common comment is that "the EU echoes the U.S. on human rights issues," **suggesting its policies are driven more by political pressure than by self-interest.** This reinforces the perception of the EU as a "vassal state" in U.S.-China rivalry. For instance, in December 2023, following the EU-China Leaders' Meeting, the Delegation of the European Union to China published its views on EU-China relations on its official Weibo account, "EU in China (@欧盟在中国, *oumeng zai zhongguo*)."[9] Yet the top comments still labeled the EU as "America's puppet" and sarcastically said, "Talk about your independence first, then we'll discuss cooperation."

3.2.2 Expectations of a "Balancing force"

A different perspective highlights the EU's autonomy in areas such as trade, climate change, and technology cooperation, suggesting that it **could serve as a stabilizing factor amid U.S.-China tensions.** During the U.S.-China trade war, news that the EU was preparing to counter U.S. tariffs attracted wide attention on Chinese platforms. Comments expressed approval: "Europeans are standing up," or "China and Europe should join forces against the U.S."[10] Although these sentiments fluctuate with global events, they reveal an underlying hope that the EU might serve as a potential partner. Discussions often stress the importance of the European market for Chinese exports. Yet doubts remain: because the EU and U.S. share similar rules and values, many believe that cooperation with Europe is inherently unstable. This duality deepens the public's ambivalent perception of the EU.

3.2.3 Major International events and Shifts in public opinion

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war placed the EU squarely under the spotlight. Its swift alignment with U.S. sanctions and military support reinforced the belief among Chinese internet users that the EU "blindly follows America," lacking strategic autonomy. On Weibo trending topics, sarcastic comments proliferated: "The EU is just

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[9] See the post at: https://weibo.com/1974271741/NwWg57mep#comment, 13 December. Last access: 20 August, 2025
[10] See the post at: https://weibo.com/2656274875/Pmv4UrXW4, 9 April, 2025. Last access: 20 August, 2025

America's errand boy," or "What's the difference between the EU and NATO?"[11] Such statements hardened the view of the EU as dependent and unoriginal in foreign policy.

The 2023 Israel-Palestine conflict renewed this pattern. Online discussions emphasized the EU's hesitation and internal division: trying to align with Washington while struggling to acknowledge sympathy for Palestinian rights. Many users mocked this stance as "weak" and "principle-less." On the official Weibo account "EU in China," any China-related post met with top comments demanding to know "where the EU stands on Gaza." Meanwhile, Chinese state media highlighted the fragmented positions of EU member states, reinforcing the perception that the EU lacks a unified voice in global crises.

Summary

In Chinese online discourse, the EU is interpreted through the U.S.-China rivalry lens. Its image oscillates between "follower without independence" and "potential counterbalance." This uncertainty means that evaluations of the EU shift quickly with global events.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have strengthened the dominant perception of the EU as strategically weak and lacking autonomy, often framed with sarcasm or criticism. Yet paradoxically, such critiques also contain implicit expectation: that the EU could, if it chose, play a more independent and meaningful role in global geopolitics.

3.3 The EU's image on social and value issues

If the EU is seen as a "power" in economics and great power relations, then on social and value issues it is viewed as taking a "position." **The former involves cooperation and competition driven by interests, while the latter touches on ideology and identity.** For this reason, Chinese internet users' attitudes toward the EU on value-related topics tend to be more emotional and closely tied to national identity. Discussions around Xinjiang, human rights, freedom of speech, the death penalty, and gender issues often trigger strong nationalist reactions, shaping the EU as a "critic of values."

(1) **Xinjiang and Human Rights.** The EU's focus on Xinjiang and related sanctions has been one of the most intense sources of public debate. Many internet users see it as "interference in China's internal affairs," often drawing direct parallels with U.S. "human rights diplomacy." Such discourse usually comes with resentment and nationalist sentiment, **portraying "human rights" as a Western tool to contain China.** A typical example occurred when the EU's official Weibo account "EU in China" repeatedly posted in support of human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng.[12]

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[11] See the comment section of the post at:
https://weibo.com/1974271741/PBOgbDt8R?display=0&retcode=6102, 19 July, 2025. Last access: 25 August, 2025
[12] See the posts at: https://weibo.com/1974271741/OupuJ7y3J#comment, 28 August, 2024;

These posts quickly attracted criticism and even insults, with one top comment stating: "Your support only proves he's not a good person." Others sarcastically accused the EU of ignoring human rights in Gaza while singling out China.

(2) **Freedom of Speech and Double Standards.** Some users have questioned the EU's supposedly "selective" stance on free speech. Examples often include investigations into the messaging platform Telegram or restrictions on pro-Russian content in Europe. Critics use such cases to argue that the EU itself limits speech, and therefore should not treat freedom as absolute. This often feeds into broader accusations of "double standards": the West being strict toward China but lenient toward itself.

(3) **The Death Penalty and Value Conflicts.** The EU has long advocated for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty. On Chinese social media, however, this stance is usually dismissed as "out of touch with China's realities." Many commenters argue that the death penalty is still necessary to maintain order in Chinese society and is deeply rooted in cultural traditions. The EU's position is therefore seen as unrealistic, or worse, as an expression of "moral superiority."

(4) **Gender Issues and Limited Resonance.** On gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, the EU has received some positive recognition on *Xiaohongshu* and certain WeChat accounts, especially among younger female users. However, this approval is usually individual and lifestyle-oriented rather than political. The mood quickly shifts to defensiveness when EU policies are perceived as criticizing China.

In short, the EU's image on value issues is highly polarized. On one side, a minority sees it as a "reference point of modern civilization" for advocating human rights, freedom, and equality. On the other, in much broader public discourse, it is framed as a "Western tool of interference." This tension makes value-related topics especially prone to triggering nationalist emotions, turning them into flashpoints in China-EU relations. Moreover, as noted earlier, geopolitical events also feed into this perception. Many internet users argue that the EU's hesitation over the Israel-Palestine conflict exposes its hypocrisy on human rights: "What about Israel? What about Palestine?" has become a recurring response under EU social media posts.

3.4 Summary

Analysis of Chinese social media discourse reveals several overall patterns in public attitudes toward the EU:

(1) **Pragmatism first, but easily disrupted by nationalism.** On economic, trade, and technological issues, discussions are mainly pragmatic, focusing on China's development interests. Yet on sensitive topics such as Xinjiang, human rights, or value differences, nationalist sentiment rises quickly, often pushing discourse into confrontation. This dual logic - rational calculation coexisting with emotional

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https://weibo.com/1974271741/ODUGpj2ln#comment, 30 October, 2024；
https://weibo.com/1974271741/P8rLhFJEU#comment, 7 January, 2025.

reaction - is key to understanding Chinese views of the EU.

(2) **Cooperation and suspicion in parallel.** In many discussions, the EU is seen as a potential partner capable of balancing U.S. influence, especially as China-U.S. rivalry deepens. At the same time, widespread doubts remain about the EU's ability to act independently, with many believing it will ultimately follow the U.S. **This tension between "cooperation as an expectation" and "doubts about capacity" keeps the EU's position in Chinese discourse unstable.**

(3) **Amplification by external events.** Major international events such as the China-U.S. trade war, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Palestine conflict amplify existing perceptions of the EU. Narratives typically stress its "weakness" or "lack of independence," reinforcing the image of the EU as a "secondary player" in the great power game.

Chinese public attitudes toward the EU are therefore not uniform, but shaped by both pragmatic interests and emotional reactions. For EU policymakers, this means Chinese public opinion can provide social support for cooperation (e.g., in trade or green transition), but can just as easily escalate divisions on sensitive topics.

> *The effectiveness of EU-China relations may depend on how well the EU emphasizes pragmatism in cooperative areas while avoiding the triggers of nationalist backlash on value issues.*

4. Implications for Policymaking

In the previous sections, we analyzed the main topics and patterns of discussion about the EU on Chinese social media. These discussions are not isolated online conversations, but rather the result of multiple interacting factors: different actors, institutional settings, and technological systems. For the EU, **understanding these underlying dynamics is crucial.** It helps distinguish which voices are closer to genuine public opinion and which are largely shaped by guidance and amplification effects. At the same time, it provides valuable reference points for EU policymaking and public diplomacy toward China. Only by examining how online opinion is generated, and by considering its potential policy implications, can EU policymakers be better prepared to navigate the complex and fast-changing landscape of public opinion in China-EU relations.

4.1 Actors Behind Online Views

(1) Ordinary Internet users: Pragmatism Mixed with Nationalist Sentiment

Ordinary users form the "base layer" of social media discussions. Their attitudes are largely pragmatic, focusing on jobs, trade, studying abroad, visa convenience, and

other tangible interests. Yet whenever sensitive issues such as Xinjiang, human rights, or freedom of speech arise, nationalist emotions are quickly stirred, often leading to highly emotional or confrontational comments. This dual structure is key to understanding how Chinese internet users perceive the EU.

(2) Opinion Leaders and Independent Media: Agenda Amplifiers

On platforms like Weibo and WeChat official accounts, opinion leaders and independent media accounts often act as "agenda amplifiers." Through their choice of topics and narrative framing, they connect specific events to broader themes such as "system comparison" or "great power competition." In doing so, they guide the public to interpret the EU's actions within a larger China-West comparison, which often intensifies emotional debate.

(3) State Media and Official Discourse: Agenda Setters

Through their coverage and commentary, state media **set the "tone" for the EU's image.** For example, when outlets like People's Daily or Xinhua criticize EU human rights policies, these topics are more likely to trend and spark widespread discussion. This agenda-setting function determines which issues are amplified and which are downplayed.

(4) Platform Algorithms and Technical Logic: Invisible Filters

Algorithmic recommendation systems shape **what information users actually see.** Trending topics list, personalized feeds, and the "echo chamber" effect mean that confrontational or emotional content tends to gain more visibility and spread more quickly. As a result, even rational or diverse perspectives can be pushed to the margins, reinforcing a one-sided, polarized image of the EU.

(5) Self-Censorship and Context Constraints: Hidden Boundaries of Expression

Beyond external censorship, many users practice self-censorship to avoid crossing sensitive lines. This means sympathetic or neutral views are often not openly expressed, producing "selective silence" in the online spaces. **These unspoken voices are also essential to consider when interpreting online opinion.**

4.2 Implications for EU Policymakers

Since online opinion in China can both support cooperation and magnify disagreement, the EU needs a more strategic approach at both policy and communication levels.

Understanding how the EU is discussed on Chinese social media is crucial not only for grasping public attitudes, but also for designing more effective communication and policy strategies.

4.2.1 Current Challenges

Chinese internet users tend to focus more on individual European countries than on the EU as a whole, weakening the EU's visibility as a unified actor.

Rising nationalism and China's own development have eroded the EU's soft power in digital spaces: public interest in and identification with the EU is not as strong as before. In addition, **the EU suffers from limited visibility and a lack of clear messaging in China.** This can foster misunderstanding and mistrust, and in times of crisis may amplify risks of misinformation, posing potential challenges to bilateral cooperation.

4.2.2 Policy Recommendations

(1) Build Digital Intelligence Capacity: to distinguish between authentic public sentiment and algorithmically amplified or state-guided opinion.

- Social media discussions in China are not equivalent to unfiltered public opinion. Many debates are strongly shaped by state media narratives and platform algorithms, which can exaggerate confrontational or emotional expressions. The EU should therefore draw on multiple sources, such as academic surveys and cross-border exchanges, and **use Chinese-language social media monitoring tools** to track emotional cycles and better understand shifting public moods.

(2) Strengthen Pragmatic Engagement: to leverage Chinese users' interest in practical benefits to build positive EU associations.

- Most Chinese internet users care about practical benefits such as jobs, trade, education, and visas. These areas provide important entry points for EU policy. By sending positive signals in education exchanges, research collaboration, and talent mobility, the EU can help build a more pragmatic and positive image. It should **highlight shared interests, common values, and global responsibilities**, while reducing the risk of sounding preachy or confrontational, and minimizing misunderstanding.

(3) Develop Nuanced Communication on Sensitive Issues: to maintain EU principles while avoiding nationalist backlash triggers.

- On human rights, Xinjiang, and freedom of speech, nationalist emotions are easily triggered. While the EU cannot compromise on core principles, how and when it communicates matters greatly. The EU should avoid excessive moral criticism, relying instead on factual statements and background explanations. It should also provide clear, multilingual content that bypasses state media interpretation.

- Additionally, it is essential to strategically **manage the time-sensitive nature of communication**, avoiding inflammatory periods. Rapid response protocols should

be developed to address misinformation or misunderstandings.

(4) Enhance EU Visibility and Build Long-Term Relationship Resilience: to establish the EU as a distinct, unified actor and create communication frameworks that can withstand periodic political tensions.

- The EU should **expand its digital presence** beyond Weibo by establishing official accounts on other major platforms such as Douyin and *Xiaohongshu*, where younger and more diverse audiences are active. This **multi-platform approach** should be part of a broader strategy that extends communication beyond government-to-government channels **to include academic, cultural, and civil society exchanges.** Crucially, the EU needs crisis communication protocols that maintain dialogue during periods of political tension or disputes. These mechanisms could prevent misunderstandings from escalating while demonstrating consistency and openness in the EU's long-term engagement approach, creating communication frameworks resilient enough to withstand periodic political disagreements.

> *The goal is not to "win" Chinese internet opinion but to create a more informed, nuanced understanding that can support stable long-term relations even amid political disagreements.*

5. Conclusion

This analysis of EU discussions on Chinese social media reveals a fundamental paradox: while online sentiment doesn't directly translate to public opinion, it significantly shapes the political environment in which EU-China relations operate. Understanding this dynamic is essential for effective European policy.

Key Findings

(1) **The EU faces a fragmented identity in Chinese digital discourse.** Chinese internet users view the EU through three competing lenses: as a valuable economic partner and standard-setter, as a dependent follower of U.S. foreign policy, and as a moralistic critic of Chinese values. This fragmented image undermines the EU's ability to communicate coherently with Chinese audiences.

(2) **Pragmatic interests dominate until nationalist triggers activated.** Discussions about trade, technology standards, and technology cooperation remain largely rational and benefit-focused. However, mentions of human rights, Xinjiang, or freedom of expression quickly escalate into emotional, nationalist confrontations that shut down constructive dialogue.

(3) **The EU lacks digital visibility and strategic narrative coherence.** Chinese users often discuss individual European countries rather than the EU as a unified actor.

During major crises, from Ukraine to Gaza, the EU appears strategically weak and indecisive, reinforcing perceptions of European irrelevance in global affairs.

Strategic Implications

The challenge ahead is clear: how to maintain principled positions while engaging pragmatically with a Chinese public that increasingly views Europe through the lens of great power competition.

For EU policymakers, these findings demand a recalibrated approach to China engagement. Pragmatic cooperation in areas like climate action, trade standards, and educational exchange can build positive momentum and demonstrate EU value. However, the EU must also prepare for inevitable friction on values-based issues while finding ways to communicate core principles without triggering nationalist backlash.

Most importantly, the EU cannot afford to ignore China's digital discourse. Online emotions both reflect and reshape long-term perceptions of Europe. By treating digital opinion as a strategic signal rather than background noise, and integrating this intelligence into policy planning, the EU can build more resilient foundations for sustainable China relations.