

## **Analyzing China-U.S. Relations in the Eyes of Chinese Scholars through Word Frequency**

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### **Abstract**

With the help of various corpus software, this paper reviews the adjectives and nouns used with high frequency by Chinese scholars when talking about China-U.S. relations from 31st August 2020 to 31st July 2021, i.e., a total of one year before and after Biden's inauguration, and the changes in the frequency of use, hoping to reflect Chinese scholars' perceptions of China-U.S. relations and how such perceptions have changed with the change of U.S. presidents. The authors find that Chinese scholars generally have lower expectations of China-U.S. relations, accepting the fact that China and the United States are strategic competitors and will compete in several fields, but still hold out hope for mitigation of China-U.S. relations and offer their own "prescriptions" from different perspectives. And with the inauguration of Biden as president, Chinese scholars believe that China-U.S. relations will remain stable overall compared to the Trump years, although Chinese scholars believe that the Biden administration's policy toward China will expose Beijing to more complex challenges.

**Key Words:** *China-U.S. relations, Chinese scholars, Trump administration, Biden administration, word frequencies*

## **1.Introduction**

As early as the 2020 U.S. election, Trump's foreign policy became the main topic attacked by Biden. The company's policy on China has been particularly strongly criticized by Biden, who believes that Trump's policy on China is "short-sighted" and that the "trade war" launched against China has not been rigorously planned, but has caused harm to American consumers. Biden also criticized Trump's move to withdraw from the TPP and his alienation of allies in the Asia-Pacific region as detrimental to the United States' competition with China. Biden also stressed several times during the campaign that if he took office, he would end Trump's misguided foreign policy, especially his policy toward China.

So, during the six months since Biden took office, has his China policy shaped the U.S.-China relationship in a way that has changed significantly from the Trump years? This question has generated a great deal of discussion in Chinese academic and policy research circles, and due to the implicit nature of Chinese leaders' statements and China's complex official discourse system, the above-mentioned discussions among Chinese scholars on this issue have become an important way to study China's perception of China-U.S. relations under Biden.

Although there have been many papers that have examined the views of Chinese scholars, on the one hand, due to time constraints, few papers have examined the views of Chinese scholars on the Biden administration. On the other hand, in terms of research methodology, the existing studies are generally policy studies based on a personal understanding or based on interviews with a few Chinese scholars. Using corpus software, this paper examines Chinese scholars' papers on U.S.-China relations published in the last six months of the Trump administration and the first six months of the Biden administration and

finds that Chinese scholars believe that U.S.-China relations will remain strategically competitive. Compared to the large number of trade sanctions imposed on China by Trump, the Biden administration's policy toward China, while it will pose more complex challenges for China, will also enable stability and hope for a de-escalation of U.S.-China relations.

## **2. Literature review**

Relations between the U.S. and China have begun to decline sharply in the wake of a series of events since Donald Trump became U.S. President. The high-level talks between the two sides in Anchorage after Biden became president also ended in an unpleasant breakdown. This has meant that China-U.S. relations, probably the most important bilateral relationship in the world today, have reached an impasse. But this stalemate has led to a wave of research and an ongoing discussion of the Chinese leadership's views on the bilateral relationship (Zhang,2021). However, as the complexity of China's political rhetoric system and decision-making process makes it difficult to explore the views of the country's leaders, it is often best to examine the views of Chinese scholars in order to examine the general attitudes of Chinese society and policymakers (Feng & He, 2015).

In fact, the study of Chinese scholars' views began as early as the last century. In 1991, David Shambaugh was the first to systematically examine Chinese scholars' views on the United States, hoping to reflect the perceptions of Chinese elites and policymakers (Shambaugh,1991), and the book succeeded in creating a wave of research on Chinese scholars. The book does not limit itself to citing the ideas of Chinese scholars to prove the author's point, but rather examines the 'Chinese scholar' as an independent object. This research design and the

predominantly interpretive approach to the text have for a long time established the basic research model of this type of study.

Along these lines, many scholars have also begun to systematically study China's perceptions of the United States through Chinese scholars (Chen, 2003). This research has led to a number of offshoots, such as the study of mutual impressions of China and the United States (Wang, 2000), China's perceptions of U.S. global strategy (Deng, 2001), and China's perceptions of changes in U.S. power (Zhang, 2005).

As the twenty-first century enters its second decade, such studies have significantly improved in terms of their entry points, the volume of literature, and research methods. For example, compared to previous studies, which were more based on textual interpretation, some scholars have begun to use more empirical questionnaire interviews to confirm China's optimistic expectations of the persistence of U.S. hegemony (Feng & He, 2015). On the one hand, scholars have continued to examine Chinese scholars' perceptions of the United States and the world order under its rule (Nathan, & Scobell, 2012; Meng, 2020; Yuan, 2019). Some scholars also have begun to look at Chinese historical and cultural perceptions, noting that the concept of 'Tian Xia (all under heaven)' has an important influence on Chinese views of the world order today (Callahan, 2008). On the other hand, as the U.S. war in the Middle East comes to an end and the rebalance of the Asia-Pacific strategy was proposed, and even though China is considered a 'strategic competitor', the relationship between China and the U.S. in the eyes of Chinese scholars has also become a major research hotspot. Chinese scholars' discussions on a 'new type of great power relations' between China and the U.S. (Hao, 2015) and their views on a 'new cold war' between China and the U.S. have received sufficient attention (Zhao, 2019). In addition, due to the dramatic and controversial 2016 election, the views of the Chinese government and scholars on the 'Trump phenomenon have also

been the subject of research (Abb, 2016).

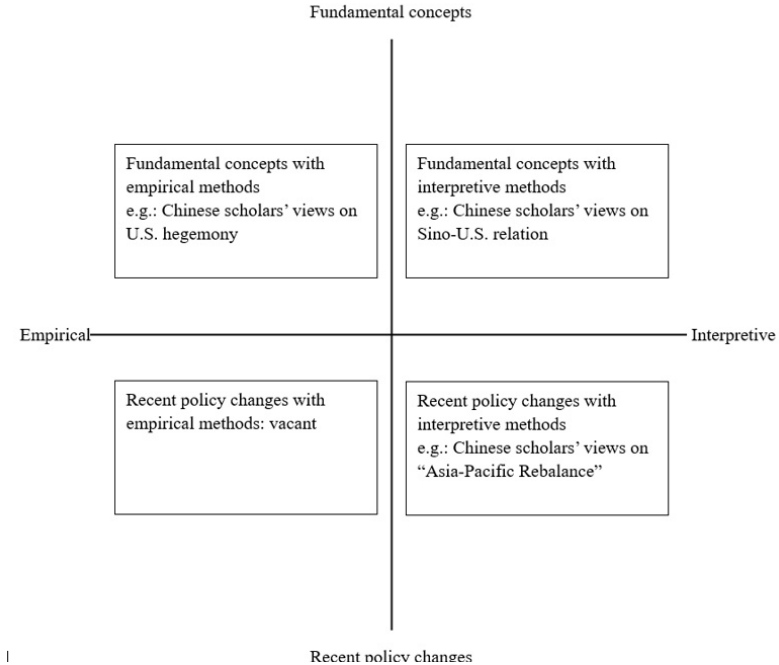
And as China's overall national strength and confidence grows, it has begun to adopt a more active foreign policy. In addition to Chinese scholars' views on the United States, Chinese scholars' understanding and discussion of China's foreign policies have become important research topics (Glaser, 2007). It also includes interviews with Chinese academics using a structural equation model and notes that a more assertive and powerful China tends to favor a less assertive foreign policy (Feng & He, 2016).

Finally, there is also a large number of papers that provide an overview of the views and discussions of Chinese scholars on a wide range of other issues. These include the development of China's soft power (Li, 2008), China's concept of national security (Breslin, 2015), regional issues around China (Wang & Meng, 2020), building a theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics and even the "Chinese school" (Noesselt, 2015), views on Europe (Zappone, 2020), and views on Lee Kuan Yew (Yang et al, 2016).

After sorting out the development of the existing literature according to time, this paper also sorts out the research topics/research methods to better find the research gap. By comprehensively sorting out the research questions and research methods of the existing literature, this paper finds that when studying Chinese scholars' views on international affairs, there are few papers that use empirical research methods, and only when exploring Chinese scholars' views on fundamental concepts with a long history and influence, empirical research methods are more common. Such as Chinese scholars' views on China's foreign policy, Chinese scholars' views on US hegemony, etc. However, whether studying Chinese scholars' perceptions of fundamental concepts or of recent policy changes, such as the "Asia-Pacific Rebalance" between China and the United States, the interpretive

approach is widely used (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Current status of research questions and research methods**



In general, these studies, which take Chinese scholars as the object of study and examine their views, have been well developed and discussed. From the initial study of Chinese scholars' views on the United States to the current study of Chinese scholars' views on various issues in the field of international relations, such studies have achieved significant results. However, there are still major methodological shortcomings in this type of research. With the exception of very few

papers that have taken an empirical approach, the methodology of this type of research is mainly literature review and interpretation (Feng & He, 2014, 2020). Such methodology is based more on the subjective reviews of the paper authors, on the other hand emphasizing only the interpretation of the views of a few prominent scholars working in prestigious universities and think tanks. While this approach allows for a more focused and clearer presentation of the views and debates of prominent scholars. However, the disadvantages are more obvious, namely that this method of interpretation is not a scientific one and has a large subjective component. The researchers base their arguments more on their perceptions than on objective evidence, which does not guarantee that the researchers always cover the overall views of Chinese academics accurately and fairly, resulting in the voices of a large number of ordinary Chinese scholars being ignored and thus losing an overall overview of the Chinese political science and international relations academia. This situation is particularly acute when studying Chinese scholars' response to recent policy changes, and no article has used a solid empirical method when examining this topic.

### **3. Problem statement**

The study of Chinese scholars' views on the United States and U.S.-China relations remains the focus of such studies, both in terms of time span and quality of research. Among them, the changes of the U.S. president can often get extra attention. For example, when Trump won the election, there were many papers that studied the discussion of the "Trump phenomenon" by Chinese scholars (Abb, 2016). And as mentioned in the literature review section, methodological flaws still exist when studying Chinese scholars' perceptions of recent changes. For example, the views of Chinese scholars on China-U.S. relations in the

early stages of a new U.S. administration. Because it is often difficult for scholars to reach a consensus on their policy preferences and to develop a unified analytical framework in the early stages of a new U.S. administration, this makes it more difficult for traditional approaches based on individual interpretations to produce insightful conclusions.

On the one hand, how Chinese scholars view the impact of the change of the US president on China-U.S relations has a particularly important research status. On the other hand, traditional research methods are relatively weak in studying this issue. Therefore, this article will focus on the Chinese scholars' impacts on China-U.S. relations before and after the 2020 election, and at the same time, adopt a more empirical research method. The main contribution of this paper is the use of empirical methods, which allow us to show more accurately and objectively how Chinese scholars view the impact of the Biden administration on China-U.S relations. The conclusions of this study will also inform theories on how domestic politics affects international relations.

#### **4. Data and research method**

In order to comprehensively cover the perspectives of Chinese scholars in political science and international relations, while filtering out low-quality papers, this paper chooses to analyze papers from the journals of Peking University Core (A Guide to the Core Journal of China) and CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index), searched and downloaded in bulk through the screening tool of CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). I selected papers published between 31st August 2020 and 31st July 2021, i.e. between the first six months of Biden's term and the last six months of Trump's term. In order to exclude irrelevant papers, the corpus used for analysis will be limited to papers



on the topic of "China-U.S. relations" under the discipline "Chinese and International Politics". Excluding some papers that only discuss China-us relations as background and are actually discussing other issues, a total of 225 papers can be analyzed. All 225 papers published in the 12-month period will be analyzed on a 3-monthly basis, divided into a total of four quarters.

The downloaded papers will first be processed through ICTCLAS software in order to allow these Chinese papers can be recognized by the corpus software designed for English text material. Then, these processed papers will be measured for each key textual feature using BFSU POWERCONC software. Among those features, this paper will focus on the high-frequency words (adjectives and nouns) in the selected text material and their changes, and use this as a basis for examining Chinese scholars' perceptions of China-U.S. relations.

## **5. Empirical findings**

### **5.1. Positive and negative aspects in China-U.S. relations: an adjective-based examination**

The most direct and effective way to understand Chinese scholars' views on China-U.S. relations is to examine their use of adjectives in their writings. In the existing studies on China-U.S. relations, some scholars have given ideas and basic models on how to judge the tendencies of scholars through words and measured them in terms of both positive and negative aspects (Qi, 2021). After measuring by corpus software and eliminating some errors (e.g. the word "prosperity", although it appears very frequently, is often used in conjunction with "China" and "Chinese economy" through corpus software and is not directly related to the China-U.S. relationship), I have selected the ten most frequently used adjectives from each of the positive and negative

aspects. I have also made tables of their English translations and word frequencies.

**Table 1 Top 10 high-frequency adjectives with positive connotations**

稳定	平衡	有效	尊重	平等
Stable	Balanced	Effective	Respectful	Equal
0.00073	0.00039	0.00032	0.00017	0.00013
缓和	灵活	健康	持久	耐心
Mitigatory	Flexible	Healthy	Lasting	Patient
0.00010	0.00009	0.00009	0.00006	0.00003

From a total of 10 adjectives used with high frequency for positive aspects, Chinese scholars have the following two main interpretations of US-China relations. First, even though some adjectives expressing positive connotations are used, Chinese scholars do not have excessively optimistic expectations about the future of China-U.S. relations. From "balance", "stability", "respect", "equality", "healthy" and other adjectives that are used frequently, it is clear that the best prediction Chinese scholars can make about China-U.S. relations is only a bilateral relationship that can remain stable, mutually respectful and equal, and is far from a friendly or close bilateral relationship.

This interpretation of the China-U.S. relationship by Chinese scholars can also be echoed in official Chinese statements and pronouncements. For example, in February 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi wrote an essay in the *Global Times* about his views on China-U.S. relations. In describing the future of China-U.S. relations, he cited mutual respect and non-intervention, a fundamental principle of

international law, as his first requirement for the future of China-U.S. relations (Wang, 2021). It is easy to see that, in the eyes of the Chinese Foreign Minister, today's China-U.S. relations do not even meet the requirements of the fundamental principles of international law, and China only wants to make this bilateral relationship conform to the requirements of the fundamental principles of international law. On 17th March 2021, before the China-U.S. High-Level Strategic Dialogue in Anchorage, the then Chinese Ambassador to the U.S., Cui Tiankai, also stated frankly that he had "no excessive expectations or illusions about this dialogue (Xinhua, 2021b) ".

Second, Chinese scholars today still have some hope for a "mitigation" of China-U.S. relations, and a "patient", "flexible" and "effective" approach to diplomacy is what Chinese scholars have prescribed for the "mitigation" of China-U.S. relations. For China, flexible diplomacy was one of the keys to the establishment of diplomatic relations and the 'honeymoon period' of China-U.S. relations, and it is natural that flexible diplomacy has re-emerged as an option for Chinese policymakers and Chinese scholars at a time when China-U.S. relations are at an impasse. At the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in 1971, American athlete Glenn Cowan inadvertently hitchhiked on the Chinese team's bus and struck up a friendship and exchanged gifts with the Chinese players on board. The Chinese athlete who took the initiative to exchange with Cowan was even severely criticised due to the revolutionary ideology and tense international situation in China at the time. In reality, however, China had already held several talks with the United States in a third country to discuss the normalisation of China-U.S. relations. Chairman Mao Zedong even discussed Nixon's visit in person with Edgar Snow, the American journalist who wrote *Red Star Over China*, an account of life in the communist base areas of China at the time. So, keenly aware of the

opportunity to improve relations with the United States and to use it as a counterweight to the Soviet Union, Chinese policymakers, through the friendship between athletes, sent an invitation to the American men's table tennis team to visit China for a friendly match, which eventually kicked off the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States and made this 'ping pong diplomacy' one of the proudest achievements of Chinese diplomacy. Since then, more flexible forms of diplomacy, including sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, have been increasingly adopted by the Chinese government and are receiving more and more attention in academic circles.

I then used the same method to extract the ten most frequently used negative adjectives by Chinese scholars to explore what exactly Chinese scholars see as the negative aspects of China-U.S. relations.

**Table 2 Top 10 high-frequency adjectives with negative connotations**

严重	强硬	强烈	复杂	激烈
Serious	Tough	Strong <sup>1</sup>	Complex	Fierce
0.001454	0.00079	0.00064	0.000346	0.000257
紧张	严峻	焦虑	敏感	失衡
Tense	Severe	Fraught	Sensitive	Imbalance
0.000205	0.000181	0.00017	0.000121	0.000062

The software's collocation function shows that the word "strong" is not used to describe the strength of the relationship between China and the United States, but mostly to describe the intensity of the hostility between the two countries.<sup>1</sup>

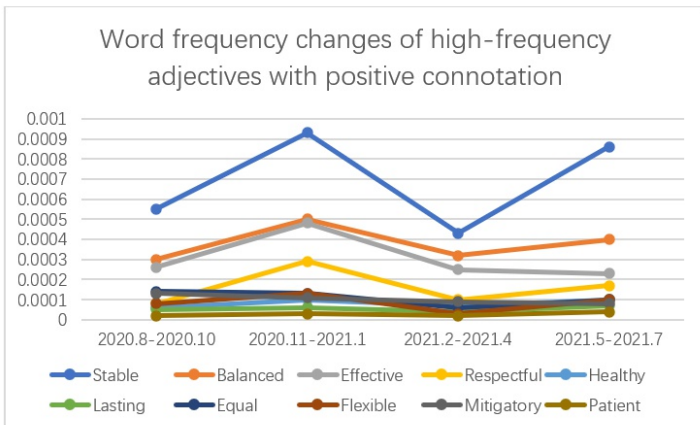
Similar to Chinese scholars' use of adjectives with positive connotations, Chinese scholars have used adjectives with negative connotations such as "complex", "tense", "grim", "anxious", etc. They acknowledge the "imbalance" between the U.S. and China in fields such as trade and the two countries' "tough" policies towards each other but do not make an entirely negative judgment of the already acknowledged stalemate in China-U.S. relations, but try to replace the value judgment of "poor" China-U.S. relations with a factual judgment of all aspects of the relationship. Chinese scholars' cautious use of adjectives with negative connotations also implies that Chinese scholars still have some hope for mitigation of China-U.S. relations and, in conjunction with their use of adjectives with positive connotations above, the conditions required for mitigation of China-U.S. relations are often discussed by Chinese scholars.

Not only Chinese scholars but also Chinese officials have tried to avoid making entirely negative value judgements about China-U.S. relations in some of their statements and have generally referred in their discourse to the helpfulness of China-U.S. dialogue and the possibility of mitigation of China-U.S. relations. For example, the high-level dialogue between the U.S. and China, which took place in Anchorage, was generally perceived within China as an unpleasant and unproductive meeting due to the heated public debate between the two sides in front of the media during the opening remarks. However, after the talks, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who participated in the dialogue, still told the media that "the dialogue was helpful" and that it would "keep China-U.S. relations on a healthy and stable track (Xinhua,2021c)".

## 5.2. Changes in perceptions of China-U.S. relations: an examination based on adjectives' frequency changes

Having established Chinese scholars' views on China-U.S. relations in general terms, have these general views changed as Trump's term ends and Biden's term begins? I calculated the frequency of the adjectives mentioned above in the papers of Chinese scholars in each quarter and made a line graph in chronological order.

**Figure 2 Word frequency changes of high-frequency adjectives with positive connotations**



The first is the change in word frequency of adjectives with positive connotations used by Chinese scholars. It is clear from the table that a “stable”, “balanced”, “effectively” communicated and mutually “respectful” China-U.S. relationship has always been the most important goal advocated by Chinese scholars, both during Trump's term and during Biden's.

Secondly, Chinese scholars are clearly looking more at the positive elements of the future of China-U.S. relations between November 2020 and January 2021, after Biden's election but before his inauguration, than at the end of the Trump administration. In the eyes of Chinese scholars, while Biden is clearly not a pro-China president, his "establishment" status, his explicit campaign pledge to work with China "when necessary", and the fact that for domestic political reasons, Biden is considering a considerable degree of "de-Trumpification" in his foreign policy. All of these factors have led Chinese scholars to predict that a Biden administration would open up new possibilities for mitigation of China-U.S. relations (Shi, 2021). In addition, as a president with globalist values, Chinese scholars also generally believe that there will be more opportunities and space for cooperation between the U.S. and China in addressing global climate change, international counter-terrorism cooperation, international macroeconomic stability and a range of regional hotspot issues, and that such low-level political cooperation will clearly contribute to a stable and balanced China-U.S. relationship (Da, 2020).

However, between February 2021 and April 2021, the optimistic expectations of Chinese scholars about China-U.S. relations took a clear hit. Much of the reason for this is that after Biden's formal inauguration as U.S. president, the Biden administration's policy framework toward China matured and produced a series of concrete policy outcomes that were detrimental to China. First, even though Biden had pointed out in his first election debate with Trump that the ultimate burden of tariffs was on U.S. citizens, the tariff hike on U.S.\$370 billion of Chinese products was temporarily retained. In addition, the new U.S. trade representative, Tai, at his Senate appointment hearing on 25th February 2021, directly supported the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration, calling them a "legitimate tool" (Tai, 2021). Second,

Biden also stated that he neither intends to immediately abolish the first phase of the trade agreement, nor is he ready to start negotiations on the second phase of the agreement (Reuters, 2020), but chooses to continue to regard the agreement as an important lever to exert pressure on China (He, 2021). Third, in China's view, the United States' sanctions and restrictions on Huawei do not only mean sanctions on Huawei as a company but are seen as a systemic containment of China's high-tech industries and even China's right to survive and develop (Da, 2020). While Gina Raimundo, the new Secretary of Commerce in the Biden administration, refused to remove Huawei from the entity list (Martin, 2021). Finally, due to Biden's special emphasis on the alliance system and ideology, the Five Eyes countries with a high degree of convergence in the ideological field began to condemn China's policies with greater intensity on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and political systems after Biden was elected. While the Five Eyes countries are coordinating their efforts to put pressure on China in a number of ways, Biden is also stepping up preparations for a "democracy summit" with clear targets for China (Cai & Wang, 2021).

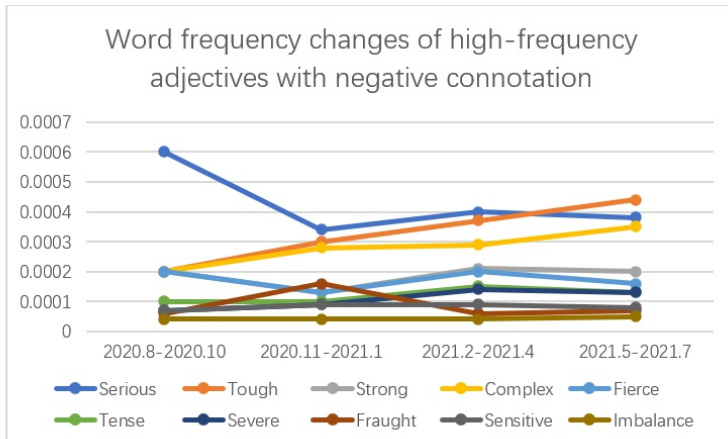
While Biden's ideological attacks on China have not caused China any direct economic damage compared to the tariffs and sanctions under Trump, they have had a considerable impact on China's domestic public opinion and international image. Overall, despite adjustments in specific measures, the Biden administration has basically inherited from the Trump administration the overall goal of strategic containment of China, which is the fundamental reason for discouraging Chinese scholars' optimistic expectations of China-U.S. relations.

Finally, between May 2021 and July 2021, on the one hand, Chinese scholars began to increasingly use adjectives such as "stable" to describe China-U.S. relations due to the gradual increase in multi-field and multi-level dialogue between China and the U.S., which expressed their



optimistic view of China-U.S. relations during the Biden administration. On the other hand, the frequency of use of most adjectives with positive connotations returned to the levels seen during the Trump administration, reflecting the cautious and limited optimism of Chinese scholars.

**Figure 3 Word frequency changes of high-frequency adjectives with negative connotations**



The use of negative connotation adjectives by Chinese scholars during this one-year period is more and more intriguing. Chinese scholars' assessments of China-U.S. relations have also become more complex since Biden's election than they were at the end of the Trump administration from August to November 2020. On the one hand, Chinese scholars are increasingly less likely to use the term 'serious' to describe the current state of China-U.S. relations or 'fierce' to describe the competition between China and the U.S. On the other hand, 'tough' is

more often used to describe U.S. policy toward China, 'complex' is increasingly used to describe the challenges China faces, and 'anxiety' has become a more prominent feature of China-U.S. relations. anxiety' has become a more prominent feature of China-U.S. relations.

Taking these changes in word frequency together, Chinese scholars' overall assessment of China-U.S. relations under the Biden administration can be seen: compared to the Trump administration, the Biden administration's China policy will be even more "tough" in a sense and will expose China to more "complex" challenges. But the competition between China and the United States will not be more "fierce" and the damage to China-U.S. relations will not be more "severe" than the damage to China-U.S. relations caused by Trump's China policy. While this assessment of China-U.S. relations under Biden may seem contradictory, it reflects the unique observations and insights of Chinese scholars on China-U.S. relations.

Apart from the above-mentioned fact that Biden will continue to compete with China on issues such as technology and trade, why do Chinese scholars see the Biden administration's China policy as a more "complex" challenge for China? First, compared to Trump, who has virtually cut off dialogue with China and has been competitive and confrontational in almost all fields, the Biden administration has been more deliberate in its China policy, focusing on key fields of competition and confrontation with China, while highlighting the possibility of cooperation with China in some fields. As some Chinese scholars have pointed out, Biden sees China's challenges to the United States focused on three fields: economy, security, and democratic values, and the United States will fight back against China on these three fronts while still being prepared to work with China, and this highly pragmatic approach means that the Biden administration is inherently aligned with the Trump administration in its goal of containing China, but the Biden

administration is more tactical, still cooperating with China when it is in its interest to do so (Li & Wei, 2021). This flexible and pragmatic containment policy, which seeks to both profit from and contain China, is more confusing and inevitably poses more complex challenges for Beijing to address.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng's statement during his meeting with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Sherman focused on China's view of Biden's policy towards China, noting that "the U.S. trichotomy of competition, cooperation and confrontation is a "blindfold" to contain and suppress China. Confrontation and containment is the essence, cooperation is a stopgap measure, and competition is a discourse disguise." "When the U.S. asks for help from China, the U.S. demands cooperation, and in fields where the U.S. thinks it has an advantage, the U.S. decouples and cuts off supplies, imposes sanctions and blockades, and is not above conflict and confrontation to contain China (Xinhua, 2021d)."

Moreover, domestic political factors in the U.S. have convinced Chinese scholars that the Biden administration's policy towards China will in some sense be even more "tough" than that of the Trump administration. Given that Biden and Harris belong to the Democratic centrist faction, they will inevitably rely on the essential support of the left-wing of the Democratic Party to win the election and then govern, and thus Biden will, to varying degrees, accommodate the radical demands of the left-wing Democratic Party on China policy on issues such as human rights standards and carbon emissions, even though these issues may be sensitive for the Chinese government or may become the intervention of China's domestic jurisdiction. In addition to the Democrat left-wing, the Biden administration, which has taken over an unprecedentedly divided American society, must accommodate Trump and the Democratic basic voters to a considerable extent. The Biden

administration needs to "heal" a deeply divided America to a more significant degree, otherwise, it will lose its basic political and moral self-confidence and damage its basic political reputation, so a tougher policy toward China is one of the ways he can avoid attacks from Republicans for being "soft on China" (Shi, 2021).

So why is it that Chinese scholars still generally believe that the damage to China-U.S. relations will not be more "serious" than the damage to China-U.S. relations caused by Trump's China policy, given that Biden will take tougher measures and more flexible means to compete and contain China? First, in its China policy, the Biden administration is likely to change Trump's China policy, which seeks to subvert and remove the Chinese Communist Party from power, and may instead choose to try to allow China to build a looser system of governance while keeping the Chinese Communist Party intact (Yang, Sun, & Li, 2021). Secondly, the Biden administration's foreign behaviour would be less volatile than Trump's and could therefore be expected to bring more predictability and corresponding stability to U.S. policy and strategy toward China, within reasonable limits (Li, 2021). Third, the Biden administration is more concerned about the possibility of conflict with China than Trump's recklessness, and may therefore enhance diplomatic communication and dialogue between the U.S. and China at all levels and in all fields, or reverse the trend of de facto diplomatic "decoupling" between the two countries, which is often seen as a key element of diplomacy (Shi, 2021). Finally, as mentioned above, the Biden administration may find some effective pivot points for cooperation with China, as both sides are interested in strengthening global governance and global multilateralism in principle.

### 5.3. Various fields in China-U.S. relations: a noun-based examination

After systematically sorting out how Chinese scholars view China-U.S. relations through their use of adjectives and how this view has changed with Biden became the president, I will then count which nouns Chinese scholars use in describing China-U.S. relations, how the frequency of these nouns has changed over time and what reasons lie behind the use and change of these nouns.

First, using the same methodology as above, I extract the ten terms most frequently used by Chinese scholars in describing China-U.S. relations.

**Table 3 Top 10 high-frequency nouns**

战略	竞争	制度	秩序	权力
Strategy	Competition	System	Order	Power
0.007784	0.004566	0.002257	0.001831	0.001593
科技	主义	新冠	气候	战争
Technology	-ism	Covid-19	Climate	War
0.00146	0.001324	0.000826	0.000723	0.000621

If the use of adjectives reflects Chinese scholars' assessment of U.S.-China relations, then the use of nouns reflects which areas Chinese scholars focus on in U.S.-China relations. Undoubtedly, the most frequently used words "strategy" and "competition" fully indicate that Chinese scholars judge the nature of China-U.S. relations as "competition," and this competition is no longer at the tactical level, but at the "strategic" level. Some Chinese scholars point out that after the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, the U.S. gradually

changed its strategic perception of China and adjusted its policy toward China several times as China's economy continued to develop rapidly and the U.S. and other Western countries became economically depressed. China has also made a series of policy responses in the face of U.S. policy adjustments and strategic pressures, and U.S.-China relations have gradually entered a phase of the strategic competition (Sun & Jin, 2021)

Subsequently, the use of terms by Chinese scholars can then fully reflect what Chinese scholars believe this strategic competition actually exists in. First, there is the China-U.S competition in science and technology. In recent years, humans have made breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, 5G technology, and new materials, and China's rapid development in these emerging fields has undoubtedly created a sense of insecurity in the United States about its technological hegemony (Lu, 2020). The U.S. began to systematically compete with China in the field of science and technology when the U.S. Congress passed the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act and the Export Control Reform Act in 2018. In 2019, the U.S. added Huawei and other Chinese companies to its export control "entity list" and then asked its allies to strengthen the security scrutiny of Huawei products. Even abandoning Huawei products. This series of actions, seen by Chinese scholars as the culmination of U.S. competition with China in technology and suppression of China's right to development, has generated intense debate in Chinese academic circles (Chi, 2020).

Second, there is political system competition and "-ism" competition between China and the United States. The system here does not refer to the competition between the two countries within the framework of the international system, but more to the competition between China's socialist system and the U.S. capitalist system, as well as the competition between China's socialist ideology and the U.S.

capitalist ideology. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy Report and National Defense Strategy Report announced the end of the "engagement" policy with China and the beginning of the great power competition, and the ideological competition was naturally put on the agenda. The Biden administration attaches greater importance to ideology than the Trump administration. On February 11, the eve of the Chinese New Year, President Xi Jinping spoke with President Biden on the phone, and Biden expressed his concern about human rights issues in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet based on ideology, in addition to expressing his best wishes to the Chinese people for the Chinese New Year (Xinhua, 2021a). However, the Chinese government also attaches great importance to ideological work and is highly alert to attempts by Western countries, led by the United States, to carry out "peaceful evolution" and "color revolution" against China. President Xi Jinping has pointed out on various occasions that "ideological work is an extremely important task of the Party" and that "the invisible war in the ideological field is everywhere, and the battle without guns in the political field has never stopped (Xinhua, 2013)." In general, although both countries take ideological competition as an important part of the competition between China and the U.S., it is difficult to have a clear result of the systemic and doctrinal competition between China and the U.S. due to each other's strict defense of ideology.

Thirdly, it is the competition between China and the United States for the dominance of the current international order. The international order is highly abstract in nature, and its construction, shaping, and maintenance ultimately need to be achieved through specific rules, regimes, and institutions, while with the continuous development and changes in international relations, international institutions are increasingly becoming an important part of the international order. This makes the competition for dominance of the international order often

manifest in reality as a competition at the level of the international regime. During the Trump administration, as the Trump administration has withdrawn from a large number of international regimes, the competition between the U.S. and China is mainly reflected in the U.S.' refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the international institutions established by China, for example, the U.S. has taken an all-out hostile attitude towards the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), refusing to recognize and join it, and even pressuring its allies not to join it (Lipsy, 2021). On the other hand, the U.S. is actively creating new international regimes to marginalize China's influence and attempt to reshape the U.S.-led international order. For example, at the end of May 2020, the U.S. intends to invite Russia, South Korea, Australia, and India to the G7 summit to form an alliance to encircle and contain China (Wang, 2020). The Biden administration has reverted to many of the international institutions that Trump withdrew from in the past while continuing to create new ones that target China, such as the "Democracy Summit", which is widely seen as an important initiative to contain Chinese influence and restore U.S. influence in the international order (Zhang, 2021). China is clearly not willing to be left behind in the competition for international regimes, and international regimes led by China, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Investment Bank, are seen by Chinese scholars as not only the implementation of the Chinese government's diplomatic philosophy but also an important step in reshaping China's strategic posture in Asia, reflecting a historical reorientation of Chinese diplomacy (Zhao, 2016).

Fourth, the power shift between China and the United States is also an important topic in the study of China-U.S. relations. Among the many descriptions of the power shift between the U.S. and China, the most popular one today is that the two countries have fallen into the Thucydides Trap. The concept was developed by Professor Graham



Allison of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and its conclusion is relatively simple. Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, discussing the causes of the decades-long war between Athens and Sparta, argues that the real cause that made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the consequent fear of Sparta. From this logic, the growth in power of the emerging powers inevitably challenged the existing dominant powers, threatening their primacy in the international system and, ultimately, most likely leading to war (Allison, 2015). Although the notion that China and the U.S. are bound to fall into the Thucydides trap has been refuted and opposed by Chinese officials and scholars (Wang, 2020), it is generally accepted by Chinese scholars that the power shift between China and the U.S. is already an indisputable fact (Xu, 2019). Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, China has been able to control the pandemic at home through its strong industrial capacity, rapid mobilization, and decision-making, while exporting large quantities of pandemic prevention supplies overseas. China's outstanding commitment to the pandemic is seen as magnifying its power in global health governance, while the U.S. is seen as declining in its power to maintain global health security due to its ineffective response to the pandemic, its withdrawal from the WHO and its slow export of vaccines, which will ultimately lead to a shift of power between China and the U.S. in this area (Jiang et al., 2021).

Fifth, the United States is playing a game in many areas related to the Covid-19. At this stage, with the global COVID-19 situation basically stable, Chinese scholars are undoubtedly paying the most attention to the issue of the origin of THE COVID-19 virus (Yu, 2021). As the epicenter of the outbreak, China needs to prove that it is not the source of the virus to try to repair its international image. Although the issue of COVID-19 tracing is more like a political game between the Chinese and US governments, some Chinese scholars do join in the

debate. In this regard, On the one hand, Citing the joint research report on Coronavirus tracing conducted by China and the WHO, Chinese scholars pointed out that Wuhan may not be the original source of the pandemic and that it is "highly unlikely" to produce the virus in a laboratory (Cao & Chen, 2021). On the other hand, WHO officials, experts, and scholars as well as some officials were quoted extensively, insisting that tracing the source of the pandemic should be a purely scientific issue and should not be politicized (Yu, 2021). Although Biden had criticized the China-WHO joint research on Coronavirus traceability as a lack of transparency, Biden abandoned Trump's idea of demanding compensation from the Chinese government and admitted that the Coronavirus was not produced in a laboratory (Tyler, 2021). In general, the game between China and the United States on the origin of the COVID-19 has become one of the focuses of Chinese scholars, but how this event will develop depends on the results of coming scientific research.

Sixth, climate change may be an area of cooperation or healthy competition between the U.S. and China. After Trump became president of the United States, there was a complete restructuring of U.S. climate policy, its willingness and ability to cooperate in global climate governance has been significantly reduced, and the structure of U.S.-China cooperation in leading climate governance thus ceased to function (Song & Yu, 2018). The Biden administration, on the other hand, despite facing multiple challenges at the beginning of its administration, such as the impact of the pandemic and the economic downturn, has kept its campaign promise to make climate issues one of the administration's key priorities. Indeed, on the day he was inaugurated, Biden signed a treaty to return to the Paris Agreement. Then Biden appointed Kerry as the President's Special Climate Envoy. In terms of interaction with China, Biden also sent Kerry to China in April to issue a joint statement and

shortly afterward invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to participate in a network climate summit he convened. Despite the frequent interaction between the U.S. and China on the climate front, Chinese scholars do not seem to be overly optimistic about this. Firstly, during the Obama administration, the U.S. reached a bipartisan consensus that China was a strategic competitor of the U.S., and this bipartisan consensus continues to this day. Cooperation between the U.S. and China in the climate field under the Biden administration will inevitably be affected by the strained political relations between the two countries (Sun, 2021). Secondly, the absence of institutional dialogue between the U.S. and China will have a negative impact on cooperation in the climate sector, as when the U.S. and China worked together to reach the Paris Agreement in 2016, there were four high-level dialogue mechanisms between the U.S. and China: The Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, the Law Enforcement and Cyber Security Dialogue, and the Social and Culture Dialogue. The two sides have regular consultations on a range of issues of mutual concern, including, of course, climate change. Now, however, all four dialogue mechanisms are at a standstill due to the stalemate in China-U.S. relations (Ou, 2021).

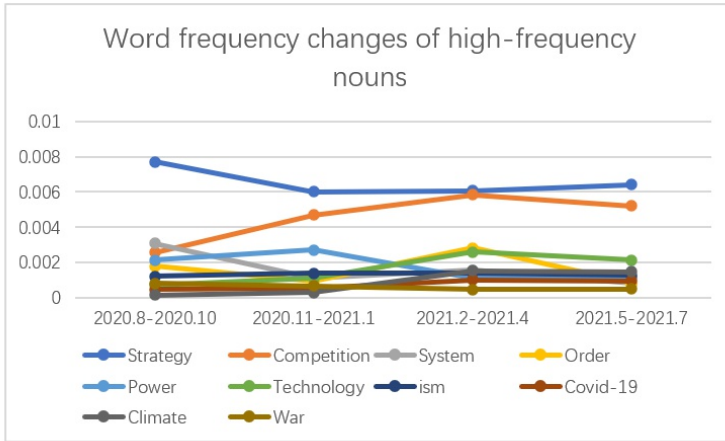
Finally, although both Chinese and U.S. leaders and senior officials have repeatedly stated that they will work to avoid conflict (Xinhua, 2021a), the cloud of war has always surrounded China-U.S. relations. In the view of Chinese scholars, the current military-security relationship and policy environment between China and the U.S. is characterized by an active confrontation with China's rise due to the U.S.'s zero-sum mindset, which is focused on great power competition. The U.S. has a non-acceptance, mistrust, and non-compromising attitude toward China's ideological core, its economic production patterns, its global economic and political positioning, and its defense needs, which has also had a negative impact on the control security situation between the two

countries, making it more likely that the security situation will slide or stay in a scenario of high control difficulty (Qi, 2021).

As the U.S. continues to emphasize great power military competition and intensify its military preparations, particularly its offensive posture, it is of course imperative for China to continuously improve and refine its deterrence and combat capabilities. In addition, as China's military power grows, especially with the launch, induction, and combat capability of some high-tech naval vessels, China is becoming more and more confident in the use of its military power, especially in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, two hotspots where the PLA is declaring its determination to defend its territorial integrity and national interests through daily navigation and flights around the islands with increasing frequency (Shi, 2021). How to control the situation in hotspots such as the Western Pacific and avoid conflict and war is also one of the issues that China and the U.S. must address.

#### **5.4. Word frequency changes: an examination based on nouns**

By sorting through the high-frequency nouns used by Chinese scholars, this paper will analyze which areas of China-U.S. relations are of key concern to Chinese scholars. Next, this research will analyze how the frequency of these high-frequency terms changed with Trump's ouster and Biden's inauguration to reflect the changing concerns of Chinese scholars.

**Figure 4 Word frequency changes of high-frequency nouns**

In contrast to Chinese scholars whose use of adjectives has changed significantly over time, the use of nouns by Chinese scholars has been largely unaffected by the change of government in the U.S. Only the word 'competition' gradually increased in frequency with the election of Biden, and the word 'strategy' remained the most used noun by Chinese scholars. This is in line with the general perception of China-U.S. relations that the strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China is the result of complex reasons and will not fundamentally improve with a change in U.S. leadership. This view is also reflected in an essay written by the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Commerce in *Forbes* magazine: “There are multiple issues that complicate U.S.-China relations and it is not realistic to expect they will all be solved within the next presidential term (Lavin, 2020).”

## 6. Discussion

First, the positive adjectives used by Chinese scholars indicate that Chinese scholars' best expectations for China-U.S. relations are still not optimistic. Words frequently used by Chinese scholars, such as "Stable" and "Equal", mean that Chinese scholars may only expect a China-U.S. relationship that conforms to the minimum norms of international law and does not cause conflicts. In addition, Chinese scholars still pin their hopes on shaping a mitigatory and healthy U.S.-China relationship through flexible and patient diplomacy. In terms of word frequency, the frequency of Chinese scholars using positive adjectives is much lower than that of Chinese scholars using negative adjectives. These positive adjectives have not been used significantly more during the Biden presidency than they were in the China-U.S. relations under Trump. In addition, although there has been fluctuation, Chinese scholars are increasingly using the word "Stable", which indicates more expectations for a stable China-U.S. relationship during Biden's term.

Second, the use of negative adjectives by Chinese scholars fully reflects the anxiety of Chinese scholars about China-U.S. relations. Compared to the prudence with which positive adjectives are used, these adjectives are highly negative and cover every dimension of bad state-to-state relations. Consistent with the change in the use of positive adjectives, Chinese scholars believe that Biden's China policy will make China-U.S. relations less "Serious", but Biden's China policy is still "Tough", and also believe that Biden's emphasis on China The alliance system, values and ideology policy toward China are bringing a "complex" challenge to China.

Third, by sorting through the nouns frequently used by Chinese scholars, this paper finds that, during both Trump's and Biden's terms, the relationship of "strategic competition" between China and the United States is generally accepted by Chinese scholars. Then, although the

possibility of cooperation between China and the United States in the climate field has been confirmed, the competition between China and the United States in many fields, such as science and technology and ideology, will not stop; and finally, the cloud of war still hangs over China-U.S. relations.

## **7. Conclusion**

After Biden took office, the U.S. and China have resumed multi-level and multi-field dialogues. Although these dialogues have not often yielded substantive results, the progress of the dialogues has indeed given Chinese scholars more confidence in China-U.S. relations. Compared with Trump, Biden has shown greater policy stability and predictability, which to a certain extent has raised the expectations of Chinese scholars for China-U.S. relations, although the possibility of war between China and the United States has always been a hot topic of discussion among Chinese scholars.

Beyond this good news, Chinese scholars have long argued, and indeed, that the United States still insists on viewing China as its biggest strategic competitor. Compared with Trump's large-scale use of trade sanctions and doubts about the ruling status of the Chinese Communist Party, the Biden administration's means of competing with China are significantly more precise. Biden's combined use of trade sanctions, ideological attacks, and the system of allies will bring more complex and difficult challenges to the Chinese government, making it more difficult for the Chinese government to deal with. However, due to the smooth channels of China-U.S. dialogue and Biden's clear statement that he will not conduct regime change in China, a stable China-U.S. relationship can still be expected.

Before Trump became president, Chinese scholars often used the

phrase "won't get very good, but won't get very bad either" to describe the China-U.S. relationship. It is clear, however, that this narrative was shattered by the Trump-era China-U.S. relationship, which was worse than anyone expected. With the election of Biden, China-U.S. relations seem to have been corrected, and the bottom line of China-U.S. relations has also been guaranteed. "won't get very good, but won't get very bad either" may once again become a common view of Chinese scholars on China-U.S. relations.

## Notes

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- 2. Using the software's 'collocation' function, the authors found that in the August-October 2020 paper, the word 'complex' appeared 27 times, 17 of which could be identified as describing the complexities of the U.S.-China relationship. However, by May-July 2021, the word "complex" appeared 73 times, of which 43 times could be identified as describing the complex situation facing China or the complex challenges facing China.

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