

This Map Shows China's Hilarious Stereotypes of Europe

According to Chinese web users, Italy is weak, Bulgaria is milk-fed, and Lithuania is suicidal.

BY WARNER BROWN

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What's with the British habit of wearing wigs? And why are they so fond of talking about the weather? These are just some of the common queries that Chinese web users have about the United Kingdom, at least as reflected in autocomplete results on Baidu, whose **80 percent market share** makes it China's biggest search engine.

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Search-engine autocomplete works like this: When someone begins typing a question into a search engine, an algorithm scours its archives to summon a list of previously popular ways to finish the query. Those automatic suggestions often have the added benefit of piercing the cacophony of online discourse to uncover the **profound** and **mundane** curiosities that drive people to beseech the Internet for enlightenment.

Foreign Policy has plotted the most common Chinese-language Baidu query for each European nation onto the map below. This provides a glimpse into how Chinese netizens view the peoples and countries of Europe — a continent whose industrialization once both humiliated China and inspired its admiration, and that has loomed large in the country's imagination ever since. Click the map to enlarge:

The ghosts of the past haunt Chinese queries for many countries. Chinese netizens ask why France and Poland can't beat Germany — though vague phrasing and the Chinese language's lack of verb tenses admittedly mean these might just be **soccer** questions, which also appear frequently in search results about World War II. (Those Belgian red devils? That has been the **colloquial** name for Belgian soccer players since 1906.) There is no ambiguity about Italy: Netizens ask why that nation was not subjected to the same postwar criticism as Japan and Germany. Britain's role in the Opium Wars, the successive 19th-century conflicts that forced China to grant territorial concessions to European nations, comes up. And for Germany, references to killing and hating Jews topped the search suggestions, though another top query, "Why do Germans still hate Hitler?" indicates a modicum of balance.

Quirks of European political divisions and territorial boundaries also arouse Chinese curiosity. There is considerable confusion about who does and does not belong to institutions like the European Union and the eurozone. The political status of parts of the British Isles is an object of intense interest to China's online community, which asks about the independence (or the lack thereof) of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Netizens also ask why German-speaking Austria does not unite with Germany, and why Italy and Spain do not respectively annex the Vatican City and Portugal.

Attitudes toward China feature prominently in Europe-related search results. Albania's only result relates to the **breaking-off of relations** with China in the 1970s. Several of Turkey's results have to do with its perceived opposition to China and support for "**East Turkestan**," a separatist group that China's government often blames for violence in the restive western region of Xinjiang. The top suggested search for Poland asks why it hates China, with most results linking **to an essay** cataloging a range of slights extending from the 1919 Paris Peace Conference to the **2008 Beijing Olympics**. And as for France, a leading query asks why locals in the top European tourist destination for Chinese tourists so often cheat Chinese travelers.

A couple of caveats bear mentioning. Similar to Google, Baidu's autocomplete function is powered by an opaque algorithm, and while frequency of searches plays a key role in propelling results to the top of the suggestion lists, other variables like the time and location of a search factor as well, meaning results cannot necessarily be reproduced with consistency. Also, Chinese grammar means there often are multiple ways of expressing even simple queries. See below for an example for Switzerland. Notice the different arrangement of Chinese characters in the initial question stems:

Autocomplete suggestions are most numerous for large, rich countries and grow fewer as countries get poorer and smaller. Baidu has no suggestions at all for most Balkan nations, suggesting limited Chinese interest in a region that **weighs heavily on the minds** of some Europeans. This makes also for a curious distinction from some **Google-derived autocomplete maps**, which show a morbid interest with the region's relative poverty. It may be that the sheer number of small nations splits queries into batches too small for Baidu's algorithm to return consistent suggestions.

So why *do* the people of Britain don hairpieces and savor meteorological chitchat? As luck would have it, Baidu's autocomplete suggestions for that country are so prolific as to suggest their own answers: Maybe it's because so many British are "bald" and are trying to "hide from talking about the Opium War."

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Massive Tianjin Blast Highlights Flaws in China's Governance Model

Endemic corruption and a weak civil society breed industrial safety violations, experts say.

BY **THOMAS KELLOGG, KEVIN SLATEN**

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*Late in the evening on Aug. 12, a deadly chemical explosion shook the northern Chinese city of Tianjin, claiming more than 100 lives, including dozens of firefighters, and injuring over 700. State media outlets initially provided only barebones coverage, a common Chinese government approach to disasters. But an Aug. 19 **report** in state news agency Xinhua indicated that major shareholders in Rui Hai International Logistics, the company that owns the destroyed chemical storage facilities, had leveraged their political connections to circumvent safety regulations. In this **ChinaFile conversation**, experts discuss how corruption and a repressed civil society may have contributed to the blast and its high casualty count – and what lessons the Chinese government may take from it.*

***Thomas Kellogg**, director of the East Asia Program at the Open Society Foundations:*

As the *New York Times* **noted** in an Aug. 14 story on the blast, questions persist about why the authorities had allowed a company that handled dangerous chemicals to operate so close to residential areas. Xinhua's recent account of the political connections between Rui Hai and powerful state-owned enterprises, and the means through which the company allegedly evaded full implementation of relevant government regulations, provide details that sketch out at least in part the story behind the explosion.

But there is also a more general story to be told: One reason why Rui Hai was allowed to operate as it has, seemingly in violation of Chinese laws that forbid the storage of hazardous chemicals near densely-populated residential areas, is because there are no civil society organizations representing the people of Tianjin that could have pushed back against actors like Rui Hai, and who could have forced local officials to ensure that Rui Hai was following the law. Think about it: In China's third-largest city, with a population of more than 14 million, there are only a handful of environmental groups. If my experience meeting with environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in other Chinese mega-cities is any guide (and this impression is reflected in the **systematic research** of sociologist Anthony Spiers), the few groups that do exist are tiny, most likely with no more than three or four full time staff. They were unable to push their government to keep a close eye on companies like Rui Hai, despite the fact that **some citizens were apparently worried** that chemical storage warehouses in Binhai district presented a public health and safety risk.

Going forward, local groups may well be afraid to marshal public anger over the explosion to push for change.

One expert on Chinese environmental civil society I spoke with noted that the responses that she had seen from environmental groups in Tianjin had been “weak.” She predicted that groups in Tianjin would be hesitant to speak out on the tragedy, for fear of attracting unwanted government scrutiny.

Of course, the weaknesses in Chinese civil society are not limited to the environmental sector. There are likely few if any local civic organizations representing the residents of Vanke Port City, the residential neighborhood close to the explosion site that has now been evacuated, and of course we know that the workers at Rui Hai have no independent union representing them to ensure that management follows all health and safety regulations to the letter. Sadly, Tianjin firefighters have no independent union to represent them, to ensure that those injured have their health care costs fully covered, and to offer various forms of assistance and support to families whose loved ones died in the blaze.

Even if such groups did exist, they would be unable to get word out on allegedly lawbreaking companies like Rui Hai, given that local officials would likely not allow a big employer like Rui Hai to be subject to negative news coverage. Indeed, the local Tianjin television station was widely pilloried for **broadcasting** Korean soap operas on the morning after the explosion, even as smoke was still rising from the blast site. And the lack of democratic checks on state power means that the political leadership of Tianjin can't be voted out over its failure to fully and rigorously enforce relevant health and safety laws.

In other words, this tragedy shows the shortcomings of China's governance model, a key component of which is regular trimming of civil society organizations and activists. From the party's perspective, regular repression of civil society does have its benefits: as many experts have pointed out, there is no meaningful organized opposition to the party anywhere in China. But the refusal to allow civil society to develop also has its costs. Better governance comes through regular and engaged dialogue with the public. For better or worse, NGOs are the most effective vehicle for that dialogue, and those groups simply don't exist, either in Tianjin or almost anywhere else in China.

Surveying the blast site the day after the explosions, Guo Shengkun, the minister of public security, **stated** that “deep lessons must be learned” from the tragedy. Guo is right: there are indeed many lessons to be learned. Perhaps the Tianjin explosions will lead party leadership in Beijing to rethink its approach to civil society, and to allow groups to form, to grow and develop, to seek funding from outside China, and, most importantly, to form links with like-minded groups in other Chinese cities.

Kevin Slaten, program coordinator at China Labor Watch:

Five days before the terrifying and deadly Tianjin explosion was the first anniversary of the Kunshan Zhongrong Metal Products incident, where a massive metal dust explosion and fire killed at least 146 workers. In a ChinaFile **report** I wrote about a month after the Kunshan tragedy, I cited the latest casualty figure: 75. I also explained how the government apparently had deemed the incident a sensitive topic, censoring conversation and reporting. It was only in December 2014, four months after the explosion and after the immediate shock had subsided, that the State Administration of Work and Safety revised the death toll in Kunshan to 146 people.

In Tianjin, we see the same story playing out in a nightmarish fashion. Commensurate with the visibility of the explosion, destruction, and intense international coverage, censorship has gone into overdrive, **up tenfold** according to Weiboscope, a censorship-tracking project at the University of Hong Kong. Within a day after the event, the government had **issued directives** for permitted news reporting. A top Weibo comment on August 13 was from an assistant director at state broadcaster China Central Television who said, “[I] hope everyone resists believing or spreading rumors. Wait for official information.” Just as the official death toll in Kunshan doubled suddenly four months after the explosion occurred, we should not be surprised if **key facts** surrounding the Tianjin disaster materialize only after Tianjin has dropped from headlines.

Could robust civil society have, as Tom suggests, prevented the Tianjin chemical explosion? Yes. Muckrakers, grassroots advocates, and whistle blowers can mitigate disasters. These are features of a robust civil society that share two critical common values: oversight and participation. But these are also two forces that directly countervail the overall trend of party leadership, especially since Chinese President Xi Jinping came into power in 2012.

Chinese leadership has sought to centralize power and shrink space for independent civil society actors, not expand it. In July, over 250 human rights lawyers and activists were **rounded up** in a nationwide coordinated wave of suppression. Later this year an already cool environment for NGOs is

likely to get frigid when a **new set of regulations** unleash unprecedented scrutiny and restrictions on overseas money connected to Chinese NGOs.

The contraction of operating space for non-government actors is well-documented in Freedom House's recent report, "**The Politburo's Predicament**." Carl Minzer's recent journal article, *China After the Reform Era*, which puts these trends into a broader historical political context, concludes that the party is reversing previous liberalization of legal and political institutions for the sake of self-preservation.

The larger socio-political context in China is pointing toward more restriction of non-government entities in China. It is with this in mind that I have little optimism for Tom's hoped outcome: that the party will come away from the Tianjin disaster with a greater appreciation for the value of public oversight and participation. Instead, we are seeing a repeat of the official response to the Kunshan tragedy one year ago. Control the dominant narrative through directives. Suppress influential inquisitive voices. Focus attention on assistance and support for survivors and families. Deliver swift and resolute justice unto business owners and local officials. Let other news stories dilute the toxic subject until it becomes another disaster among many in the annals of China's industrial era.

These are the tried and true self-preservation measures that the party has utilized in the face of those industrial disasters, with potentially dangerous political repercussions. As much as it saddens me to write it, the tragedy in Tianjin (or those in Kunshan, Fuwa, Wenling, **Foshan**, or Mishazi) is not going push the rulers in Beijing to liberalize their governance model. Conversely, it will embolden them to grip more tightly.

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