

American Perceptions of China and the Chinese: Do The Media Matter?

Lars Willnat

Indiana University School of Journalism
940 E. 7th Street
Ernie Pyle Hall
Bloomington, IN 47405-7108
812.855.9828 (ph)
812.855.0901 (fax)
lwillnat@indiana.edu

Emily T. Metzgar

Indiana University School of Journalism
940 E. 7th Street
Ernie Pyle Hall
Bloomington, IN 47405-7108
812.855.1255 (ph)
812.855.0901 (fax)
emetzgar@indiana.edu

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Abstract

This study analyzes investigates various possible explanations for how U.S. media coverage of China might influence perceptions Americans have about China and the Chinese people. The findings, which are based on a content analysis of 886 news stories about China published in the *New York Times* throughout 2010 and a national online survey conducted in early 2011, document significant associations between respondents' media use and views of China's economic, political, and military power. The survey also indicates that opinions of China and the Chinese are associated with a host of other demographic and attitudinal variables, which are likely to interact with Americans' long-term exposure to media coverage of China. No evidence was found for the proposition that those with more exposure to U.S. news about China also know more about China.

Key words: public opinion, agenda setting, media coverage, United States, China

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Introduction

Media critics frequently discuss the declining U.S. coverage of international news. Explanations for this decline typically focus on high newsgathering costs, shrinking news audiences, and Americans' presumed disinterest in international news. Yet while most U.S. media organizations have cut foreign news coverage to lower costs, news about China has grown steadily. This seemingly costly trend is easy to explain: The growing importance of China as a political and economic power internationally is difficult to ignore for media outlets in the United States and elsewhere. A search for "China" in Google News, for example, reveals that mentions of China in major international news outlets mushroomed from 17,800 hits in early 2000 to more than 277,000 hits in late 2010 (see Figure 1).

While media coverage of China continues to grow, the Chinese government frequently airs concerns about how U.S. media cover their nation. Much of this coverage, so the claim goes, focuses on negative issues such as censorship, internal controls, and human rights abuses (Cheng, 2011; Mattimore, 2010). What the Chinese fear, so it seems, is that negative media coverage of China will lead to negative American public opinion about China. In turn, this could pose greater challenges for China in achieving its political goals in a still largely U.S.-driven international system.

Of course, factors beyond media coverage also influence perceptions of foreign nations. Today, many countries spend significant capital on international public relations campaigns designed to improve foreign perceptions, and counter media coverage in another country if necessary (Kioussis & Wu, 2008; Lee & Yoon, 2010; Mannheim & Albritton, 1984). China, for

example, has launched a full-blown public diplomacy effort consisting of increased international broadcasting, higher visibility for its national news agency, Xinhua, and significant investment in Confucius Institutes worldwide, including at least 60 in the United States (Lee & Melissen, 2011; Wang, J., 2011; Zhu, 2010). Referred to as China's "charm offensive" (Kurlantzick, 2007) these campaigns are supposed to contribute to what President Hu Jintao called "an objective and friendly publicity environment" for China (Wang, Y., 2008:264). China has invested more than \$6 billion in these enhanced international news and broadcasting efforts, even leasing airtime on radio stations and securing prime advertising space in New York's Times Square (Donohue, 2011; Elliott, 2011; Oliver & O'Keeffe, 2011).

In one of the earliest studies that analyzed the potential impact of public diplomacy campaign, Manheim and Albritton (1984) used time series analysis to evaluate the effect of outsiders' efforts to influence the opinions of Americans in the United States. The authors concluded that contracts with professional public relations firms in the United States can indeed increase the visibility of a nation, improve perceptions of that nation's image and influence the valence of discussions about that nation during the period of the campaign. In a more recent study, Kioussis and Wu (2008) concluded that public relations campaigns can decrease negative news coverage of foreign countries, which, in turn, constrained the impact of negative news depictions on public opinion regarding these foreign nations.

However, as Jian Wang (2006:94) notes, "managing national reputation is not just about projecting a certain national image but rather negotiating understanding with foreign publics." Thus, as observed in China's case, even well-financed public diplomacy campaigns "where state and nonstate actors use the media and other channels of communication to influence public opinion in foreign societies" (Gilboa, 2001:4) might fail if the positive messages produced

conflict too dramatically with negative real world events or are not coherent enough to have an impact. A recent analysis of international public relations efforts launched by China's manufacturing industry in response to the 2007 food and product safety crisis, for example, found that the initial defensive strategies generated an image of a hurried and harried country (Peijuan, Ting, & Pang 2009).

Figure 1 about here

While public diplomacy efforts to promote China's image in the United States might have only limited effects, the influence of mainstream media coverage on the opinions of average Americans cannot be overlooked. It is reasonable to assume that most people are heavily dependent on the mass media for information about China and its political and cultural relationship with the United States. As a result, the media should play an important role in shaping perceptions of China among the American public. Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004), for example, found that the more media coverage a nation received, the more likely respondents were to think the nation was important to U.S. interests.

Previous studies also found that exposure to news coverage increases knowledge about and can significantly influence public opinion toward foreign nations (Albritton & Manheim, 1983, 1985; Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Perry, 1985, 1987). Such perceptions, in turn, have important implications in a number of areas, ranging from the nature of personal interactions among people of differing nations to mass attitudes about foreign policy (Bartels, 1995; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1992).

The goal of the present study is to analyze the potential links between media consumption and perceptions of China in order to shed more light on the question of how media affect perceptions of other nations in general. China, we believe, is an ideal testing case. Despite

decades of attention to most components of the U.S.-China relationship (Committee on Foreign Relations, 2010; Lawrence & Lum, 2011), and despite many studies examining the content of China-focused media coverage (Chang, Lau, & Hao, 2000; Huang & McAdams, 2000; Seib & Powers, 2010; Wu, 1998), there have been no serious attempts to explain how U.S. media coverage of China might influence and shape perceptions of China among the American public. This study seeks to fill that void.

Based on a content analysis of 833 news stories about China published in the *New York Times* in 2010 and a national online survey that was conducted in early 2011 with a representative sample of 1,012 adult Americans, we seek to document that exposure to foreign news can affect how Americans think about China and its people. We first analyze the content and tone of U.S. news about China in the year preceding the opinion survey to establish what kind of messages Americans have been exposed to regarding China. The aim of this content analysis is to identify the main issues discussed in the U.S. press throughout 2010 and the overall tone in which these news stories portrayed China.

In a second step, we investigate the associations between media exposure to foreign news and attitudes toward China and its people with a representative sample of Americans. Based on the assumption that the media have an important agenda setting function in foreign affairs, the survey focuses especially on attitudes toward issues that were identified as important in the *New York Times* coverage of China. We also assume that the focus on predominantly negative issues (for example, human rights abuses and political control within China) and the overall negative tone found in U.S. press coverage of China will contribute to more negative perceptions of China among the American public. In other words, the media should not only influence the issues

people associate with China, but also the way these issues are understood and evaluated in relation to China.

In addition to evaluating these agenda setting effects, we also investigate whether Americans with more exposure to news about China do in fact know more about China. While exposure to news about China should theoretically lead to more insights about the political, social and cultural situation in China, Americans who consume more foreign news should also have more nuanced view of China. Given the complexity of foreign relations between the United States and China, such a media effect would be highly desirable and could neutralize the effects of mostly negative coverage about China found in the U.S. media.

Literature Review

U.S. media coverage of China has grown with the country's increasing economic and strategic influence. Studies in the last 20 years have documented such increases in American newspapers (Peng, 2004) and magazines (Stone & Xiao, 2007). Yet coverage of China, as with other developing countries, often falls victim to negative cycles of reporting focused on political unrest, natural disasters, and divisions between rich and poor (Chang, Lau & Hao, 2000; Huang & McAdams, 2000; Wu, 1998, 2003). Studies examining the frames applied to coverage of China regularly find a fixation on communism and its evils, the potential for civic unrest across the country, and human rights abuses (Goodman, 1999; Kobland, Du & Kwan, 1992; Perlmutter, 1996; Li & Cyr, 1998).

Other studies indicate that negative coverage of China results from decisions by its leadership. A recent illustration of this seemingly self-defeating behavior was the media blackout in China of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to dissident Liu Xiaobo (Dowell, 2010; Nye, 2011). Recent limits placed on Internet search results concerning Egypt and the "Jasmine

Revolution” – along with frequent crackdowns on foreign journalists – contribute to negative perceptions of Chinese leaders among Western media audiences.

However, global media coverage of China is not uniform. Comparing coverage by the BBC World, CNN International and Deutsche Welle, Seib and Powers (2010) conclude that although the volume of coverage was similar for each, they presented not only different kinds of stories about China, but also used different frames in telling those stories. The BBC, for example, focused less on the United Kingdom’s relationship with China and more on internal events. Unlike the other two networks, CNN did not concentrate on political issues in China and was more likely to do human interest stories, while Deutsche Welle was most likely to focus on China’s role in the international economy. The authors of that study conclude that “the different approaches [of the three networks] identify three different types of news (agendas) about China, and three different means of presenting (frames) China-related stories” (p. 41).

Along with providing insight into coverage patterns among the networks analyzed, such findings also suggest that the broader one’s diet of news about China, the wider the range of issues and perspectives to which one can be exposed. Despite obvious differences in the international coverage of China, there is still a surprising consistency in perceptions of China among global media audiences.

Public Perceptions of China

Despite the complicated dynamics surrounding China’s international role, interest in China continues to rise, particularly in the United States. In January 2011, the Pew Research Center (2011) released a survey of more than 1,500 Americans, which showed that Americans now rank Asia as more important to U.S. strategic interests than Europe. It also found that China’s economic strength is seen as a greater threat to the United States than its growing military power.

While almost two-thirds of Americans desired an improved bilateral relationship with China, a nearly equal number wanted to see the United States “get tougher with China on trade and economic issues” (p. 1).

Similarly, a recent BBC poll that questioned 28,000 people in 27 countries found that public concern about China’s economic power is growing worldwide (Walker, 2011). This perceived threat was especially high among respondents in more developed countries. However, the survey concluded that “China was still viewed positively” by most respondents. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman notes that “there’s no question that China’s rise, coinciding with a sense of stagnation and paralysis among many of the leading western democracies, is psychologically unsettling” (Walker, 2011).

In 2010, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs also issued an opinion survey that indicated growing concern among Americans about China’s potential economic threat. Yet few respondents in this or other surveys expressed serious concern about immediate military threats posed by China. Overall, these findings show that while Americans are concerned about China’s growing economic power, they also prefer U.S.-China relations to be more stable, less confrontational, and more cooperative.

Media and Perceptions of Foreign Nations

One of the goals of this study is to seek a better understanding of how exactly the mass media might influence public perceptions of foreign nations such as China. However, the current literature provides only inconclusive evidence regarding the impact of mass media on attitudes toward foreign nations. While most studies associated media exposure with more favorable feelings (Reilly, 1979) or more positive images of foreign countries, independent from geography or ideology (McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; Perry, 1989, 1990; Perry et al., 1997), two

studies linked media exposure with negative attitudes (Korzenny, del Toro & Gaudino, 1987; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). In contrast, Salwen and Matera's (1992) analysis of foreign news content and perceptions of foreign nations did not support the notion that media coverage influences public views of those nations as friends or enemies of the United States.

Most of the past research on how media influence perceptions of foreign nations has focused on four main theories that might explain a relationship between exposure to news about foreign nations and public opinion about foreign nations: (1) learning basic facts about a nation from the media, which might subsequently influence perceptions of foreign nations, (2) learning about the importance of international issues from the media, which might subsequently influence which issues people consider important when thinking about foreign nations (agenda setting), (3) being reminded of previously encountered international issues, which might be subsequently used to evaluate a foreign nation (priming), and (4) being guided by the media to see a foreign nation in a particular frame of reference, which might subsequently alter the way people think about a foreign nation (framing).

While all four theories offer reasonable explanations for how the media might affect the way people think about foreign nations, we believe that is very likely that perceptions of foreign nations are shaped by a combination of all four media effect processes (learning, agenda setting, priming, and framing). After all, people who consume international news are likely to learn at least a few facts about foreign nations and what issues might be important in international affairs. In addition, media coverage should remind some of them of previously learned facts or events that relate more or less directly to foreign nations (for example, that drug cartels are an important problem in Mexico). Finally, some audience members should be influenced by the way a nation is portrayed in the mass media, for example, as either a political ally or enemy.

We assume in this study that perceptions of China among the American public are influenced primarily by media agenda setting and framing processes. While some people certainly will learn important facts from the media about China or might be reminded of what they already know about this nation, we believe that those who consume news about China will be most likely affected by the issues the media discuss and the way the issues are framed. Since most of the U.S. media coverage of China revolves around the issues of economic expansion, human rights abuses and internal order, we expect that these issues will dominate people's thinking about China. Furthermore, because all three issues have been framed rather negatively in the U.S. media (even economic progress in China is often portrayed as a threat to the U.S. economy), we assume that those exposed to U.S. media coverage of China will hold more negative attitudes toward China, especially regarding the most-heavily covered issues.

This proposition has been supported in previous studies of first and second-level agenda setting. Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) found that the more media coverage a nation received, the more likely respondents were to think the nation was important to U.S. interests, supporting first-level agenda setting. They also found that the more negative coverage a nation received, the more likely respondents were to think negatively about the nation, supporting second-level agenda setting, but positive coverage of a nation had no influence on public perceptions. Similarly, Sheafer (2007) found that the public's evaluation of issue importance (first-level agenda setting) was influenced by issue salience in the news and by the negative tone of media coverage (second-level agenda setting). According to Schaefer, "because negative information captures our attention much more than positive information and because the common operational definition of the public agenda ('what is the most important *problem* facing the nation') focuses respondents' attention on negative information, the effect of affective compelling arguments is

unintentionally assimilated in most empirical first-level agenda setting studies. Agenda setting, therefore, appears to be based not only on message salience but on a combination of message salience and direction or valence” (p. 33-34).

Finally, it is reasonable to assume that attitudes toward foreign nations also are formed through knowledge acquisition. Previous studies have associated greater news exposure and attention to foreign news with increased foreign affairs knowledge (Korzenny, del Toro & Gaudino, 1987; McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; McNelly, Rush & Bishop, 1968; Perry & McNelly, 1988; Robinson, 1967). Thus, despite the fact that foreign news is mostly negative (primarily focusing on conflict), those who consume more news will be more likely to know more about foreign nations and therefore should also be more likely to have a nuanced understanding and more positive views of countries than those who consume less news. In other words, by increasing people’s knowledge about foreign nations, international news may lead not only to more informed perceptions of other nations, but perhaps also lead to greater immunity to negative foreign news coverage because of audiences’ ability to process information more critically (Perry, 1989). Evidence for this notion comes from a panel study of American students between 1984 and 1986, which showed that foreign news consumption not only led to greater knowledge, but also to more positive attitudes toward a variety of foreign nations (Perry, 1990).

Based on the discussion of various media effects that might explain how media affect people’s perceptions of foreign nations, we propose the following hypotheses regarding the formation of American perceptions of China and the Chinese people:

***H1a:** Respondents who consume more news will have more interest in China.*

***H1b:** Respondents with more interest in China will have more positive overall perceptions of China and the Chinese people.*

***H2a:** Respondents who consume more news will have more knowledge about China.*

H2b: Respondents with more knowledge about China will have more positive perceptions of China and the Chinese people.

H3a: Respondents who consume more news will hold more negative attitudes toward China's political, economic, and military power.

H3b: Respondents who hold more negative attitudes toward China's political, economic, and military power will have more negative overall perceptions of China and the Chinese people.

Method

Data for this study come from an online poll conducted between January 25th and February 4th with a representative sample of 1,012 adult Americans. Poll respondents were recruited by a professional survey organization that provides access to representative online panels.¹ While the overall sample compares favorably to 2010 U.S. Census data, the final set of respondents was slightly older, more educated, and racially less diverse than the overall U.S. population.²

Political interest and interest in China: General interest in politics and foreign news was measured with three questions that asked how often respondents discuss politics with friends or relatives (1 = “never,” 4 = “always”) and how interested they are in news about other countries (1 = “not interested at all,” 4 = “very interested”). Respondents also were asked how interested they are in news about China (1 = “not interested at all,” 4 = “very interested”), and how much attention they paid to the early 2011 visit of China's president to the United States (1 = “none,” 4 = “a great deal”).

Satisfaction with media coverage: Respondents were asked how satisfied they are with U.S. media coverage of China (1 = “not satisfied at all,” 4 = “very satisfied”), and whether they thought U.S. media give China too much, too little, or just the right amount of coverage.

Media exposure: Respondents were asked how many minutes they spend on an average day (a) watching TV news, (b) reading a printed newspaper, (c) reading online news, and (d) listening to radio news (all: 1 = “none,” 6 = “more than 90 minutes”).

Attitudes toward China and Chinese: A series of similar questions compared perceptions of China as a nation and perceptions of the Chinese as a people. To measure overall favorability, respondents were asked whether they have a favorable or unfavorable view of (a) China and (b) the Chinese (1 = “very unfavorable,” 4 = “very favorable”). To measure perceptions of shared values, respondents were asked to what extent they thought that (a) the United States shares similar values with China, and (b) Americans share similar values with Chinese people (1 = “to no extent,” 4 = “to a great extent”).

China’s public image: Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with 10 statements: China (1) has a rich cultural heritage; (2) is an attractive tourist destination; (3) has advanced science and technology; (4) has people with great entrepreneurial spirit; (5) has an internationally competitive economy; (6) respects human rights; (7) effectively uses diplomacy to solve international issues; (8) respects other nations’ sovereignty; (9) builds trust and cooperation among other countries; (10) regularly provides assistance in international humanitarian crises.

Economic perceptions related to China: Because most U.S. media coverage focuses on China’s economy and what it means to the United States, the survey asked respondents (a) how comfortable they are with the idea of China being the leader of Asia (1 = “very uncomfortable,” 4 = “very comfortable”), (b) how important they thought trade and investment with China are to the U.S. economy (1 = “not important at all,” 4 = “very important”), (c) whether they thought China’s recent economic expansion generally has been good for the U.S. economy (1 = “bad,” 2

= “no effect,” 3 = “good”), (d) whether they thought that more foreign trade and investment between the United States and China would increase or decrease jobs available for American workers in the United States (1 = “increase,” 2 = “no effect,” 3 = “decrease”), (e) and whether they thought that China is either a “large potential market for U.S. firms,” or “a source of competition for U.S. companies” (1= “large market,” 3 = “source of competition,” 2 = “neither/both”). The survey also gauged how Americans perceived the current and future economic position of the United States in the global economy. Respondents were asked which of six nations or economic regions (Russia, India, China, Japan, the United States, the European Union) is the world’s leading economic power. To assess how they perceived the future, respondents also were asked which of the six nations or regions they thought would be the leading economic power in 20 years.

Political perceptions related to China: Respondents were asked to what extent they thought China accounts for U.S. interests when making international policy decisions (1= “not at all,” 4 = “a great deal”), (b) how worried they are that China could become a future military threat to the United States (1= “not worried at all,” 4 = “very worried”), whether they thought China is an adversary (coded = 3), just a problem (= 2), or not much of a problem at all (= 1), and whether they thought U.S.-China relations are improving (= 3), staying about the same (= 2), or getting worse (= 1).

Knowledge about China: This was measured with multiple-choice questions that asked respondents to name China’s capital, president, and currency. Respondents also were asked whether they thought that China’s economy is larger, smaller, or about the same as that of the United States. Correct responses to each of the four questions were added into a five-point “knowledge index” that ranged from 0 (no answers correct) to 4 (all answers correct).

Interactions with China and Chinese: Previous studies have associated interpersonal contact between people from different nations with more positive perceptions of these people. To gauge the level of interaction respondents had with China and the Chinese people, this survey contained questions that asked respondents whether they (a) had ever met a person from China, (b) have friends or relatives who are Chinese, (c) know anyone currently living or working in China, (d) have ever traveled to China, (e) are interested in visiting China, and (f) speak Mandarin Chinese. The answers to each of the six questions were added into a seven-point “personal interaction index” ranging from 0 (no interactions) to 7 (a lot of interactions).

Demographics: To control for the potential demographic effects, the survey included a standard questions that assessed respondents’ sex, age, education, party identification, employment, race, and income. Respondents with higher education and income levels were expected to have significantly different perceptions of China and the Chinese because of their broader information base and greater likelihood to have traveled to China.

In order to investigate how closely American perceptions of China match the topics and tone found in U.S. media coverage about China, this study also includes a content analysis of 833 news stories about China that were published in the *New York Times* between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2010 – the year before the survey discussed above was conducted.³

Two undergraduate students familiar with the political, cultural, and social situation in China were trained in the coding of the news stories, which focused on topic, source, and tone.⁴ The list of news topics was based on 21 common types of topics that have been used successfully in other content analyses of international news. Similarly, the list of news sources was divided into 19 different types of sources and included commonly used categories such as national or local governments, business, education, media, or ordinary citizens. Finally, the headlines of all

833 news stories about China were coded based on whether they indicated a negative, neutral, or positive event. Value judgments were based on whether an event reflected positively or negatively on China as a nation, the Chinese government, or the Chinese people. In cases where no such decisions could be made, the event was judged as neutral.

Findings

Media coverage of China. The *New York Times* coverage of China in 2010 focused mostly on news about business and commerce (27.7%), international politics (19.2%), and issues of internal order (16.4%). A fairly substantial percentage of news stories also discussed trade (8.4%), national politics (5.1%), cultural issues (4.4%), accidents and disasters (3.3%), and censorship in China (2.6%). However, other important political and social issues, such as the environment (0.3%), social welfare (1.2%), housing (0.9%), transportation (0.8%), science and technology (1.1%), and the military (1.0%) received much less coverage than expected.

Overall, more than 3,800 news sources were identified in the *New York Times* coverage of China in 2010. The majority of sources identified come from China (43.4%) and other nations (36.8%). Only about 2 in 10 news sources represent the United States. Overall, 25.2% of all sources represent business, 21.8% the government, 12.4% education, 6.6% ordinary citizens, 6.5% the mass media, and 4.2% the police and justice. The origin of sources in these top categories is fairly evenly distributed, however, among government sources, those that come from the United States dominate with 37.0% as compared to 26.1% of government sources from China. The same is true for business sources, which tend to come from the United States rather than China (21.8% vs. 16.0%). However, more than a third (37.8%) of all business sources come from other nations. Interestingly, the press coverage of the *New York Times* features slightly

more Chinese than U.S. sources that represent the mass media (10.2% vs. 3.0%), the police and the justice system (7.6% vs. 1.6%), and ordinary citizens (10.1% vs. 3.1%).

The headlines of the 833 news stories on China are mostly negative (68.0%) in tone and often put China in the role of the aggressor by stating that China “arrests,” “bans,” “escalates,” “insists,” “halts,” or “rejects.” As Table 1 shows, the majority of headlines about internal order (82.8%), national politics (66.7%), and international politics (64.1%) are negative in tone. However, even clearly apolitical issues such as health and social welfare (72.7%), transportation (57.1%), or housing (75.0%) are presented in a negative light. In addition, positive trends such as the growing economy in China are often framed in a negative way by pointing out how China’s growth might harm the U.S. economy. As a consequence, a large number of headlines that relate to trade (60.8%) and business (44.4%) carry negative tones. Only about one in 10 headlines is judged to be positive in tone, while about a third (29.7%) are neutral in tone. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that the tone of U.S. news about China is decidedly downbeat, which might amplify the coverage of negative news that relate to issues such as internal order or international politics.

Perceptions of China and the Chinese. Despite the oft-cited assumption that Americans are uninterested in foreign affairs, this study finds strong empirical support that this is not the case. As Table 3 shows, about eight in 10 Americans say they are at least somewhat interested in foreign news. Similarly, about three-quarters of Americans state that they are at least somewhat interested in news about China.

Despite such interest, findings indicate the vast majority (90%) of Americans have not traveled to China and fewer than half (48.2%) are interested in doing so. At the same time, about seven in 10 Americans say they have met someone from China. Overall, Americans claim

interest in news about China, but have limited direct experience with the country despite greater exposure to Chinese people

The findings of the survey indicate that China is seen by most Americans as having a rich cultural heritage (59.5%) and an internationally competitive economy (44.1%). About one-third of Americans also believe China has advanced science and technologies (37.6%), as well as great entrepreneurial spirit (31.0%). Yet only about one-quarter say China is an attractive tourist destination (26.2%), which might explain why fewer than half the respondents are interested in visiting China. When considering international politics and human rights, China's image deteriorates quickly. Fewer than one in 10 Americans believe China has built trust and cooperation among other nations (7.7%), uses diplomacy effectively (7.7%), assists in international crises (7.6%), values human rights (7.0%), or respects the sovereignty of other nations (5.6%).

This negative image may partly be responsible for the dominant perception that the United States shares few values with China. As Figure 2 shows, only about one-quarter (23.2%) of Americans believe the United States and China share similar values as nations. Similarly, about one-third (37.5%) believe American people share similar values with Chinese people. Overall, Americans are fairly skeptical that China's government or its people share values and beliefs that characterize American culture and politics.

Figure 2 about here

Despite such skepticism concerning shared values, questions focused on overall favorability yielded different results. As Figure 3 shows, only about one-third (35.8%) of Americans view China favorably – a fairly small number that likely reflects various political and economic disputes between the United States and China. However, almost seven in 10

Americans (69.9%) view Chinese people favorably, which is a clear indication that Americans separate China's government and its people when they consider their overall attitudes toward both. Such positive views of the Chinese people apparently are strong enough to overcome the perception that Americans and Chinese do not share many values.

Figure 3 about here

Perceptions of political, military and economic issues that involve China are also somewhat conflicted. For example, while eight in 10 Americans recognize that trade and investment with China are important to the U.S. economy, almost half (46.3%) also think these activities will reduce the number of jobs available in the United States. Unsurprisingly, about four in 10 Americans believe that China is a competitor of the United States, rather than just a large market for U.S. companies (14.3%).

Economic fears are reflected in questions that try to ascertain how Americans evaluate the economic power of the United States and its rivals. When asked which is the leading economic power today – Russia, India, China, Japan, the United States, or Europe – slightly more than half of Americans name the United States, while only about one-third say it is China. This perception was reversed when respondents were asked which nation will be the top economic power in 20 years. Slightly less than half (43.3%) of Americans named China, while slightly more than one-third said it will be the United States. These findings indicate that most Americans recognize China's growing commercial influence and expect it to eventually overtake the United States as the leading economic superpower.

At the same time, six in 10 Americans worry that China might become a military threat to the United States. This is likely reflected in perceptions among most Americans that China does not consider U.S. interests when making foreign policy decisions (58.1%), or uneasy feelings

about China's leading role in Asia (53.4%). At the same time, only 18% of Americans see China as an adversary and a clear majority believes that U.S.-China relations are either improving (20.2%) or remain static (47%).

Media and perceptions of China and the Chinese. The first set of hypotheses states that respondents who consume more news will have more interest in China, which in turn should correlate with a more positive view of China and the Chinese people. To test these potential relationships, interest in news about China was entered as the dependent variable in a hierarchical regression model that traced media exposure (TV, newspaper, online, radio) while controlling for respondents' interest in international news; political, military, and economic attitudes toward China; perceived shared values; direct interaction with Chinese; and demographics. As predicted, interest in news about China is significantly associated with exposure to television, online, and radio news (see Table 4, first column). While these associations are fairly weak, they survived the relatively strong impact of all the model's control variables. Thus, respondents with more media exposure tend to be more interested in China.

The findings also support the second part of Hypothesis 1. As predicted, interest in news about China is strongly associated with more positive perceptions of China and its people (see Table 4, third and fourth column). Consequently, respondents who consume more news are more likely to be interested in China and hold positive perceptions of China and the Chinese.

Interest in news about China also is more pronounced among older female respondents who are interested in international news, live in cities, and regularly discuss politics with their friends. In addition, those who say that Americans share similar values with Chinese – and interact more frequently with them – also tend to be more interested in news about China. Interest in China also is higher among Americans who believe that China cares about the United

States in foreign policy matters, those who worry about China as a military threat, and those who are more comfortable with China's political leadership in Asia.

Table 4 about here

The second set of hypotheses suggests that respondents who consume more news will know more about China, which, in turn, should be associated with more positive perceptions of China and its people. As Table 4 shows, respondents with more exposure to online news tend to know more about China, while those who primarily read newspapers, watch TV news, or listen to radio news, do not exhibit greater knowledge. Thus, the first part of Hypothesis 2 is partly supported.

While online media proved to be an important predictor of knowledge about China, other variables also show significant associations with more knowledge. Urban respondents with more education, income, and interest in foreign news, for example, tend to know more about China. More knowledge was also found among those who often discuss politics with friends or relatives and those who interact directly with Chinese.

Knowledge about China also is associated with more apprehension about China's leadership role in Asia, the belief that China is an adversary, and the fear that China's economic growth could eliminate jobs in the United States. On the other hand, those knowledgeable about China are less likely to believe that China poses a military threat to the United States. Interestingly, those with more knowledge about China also tend to believe that Americans and Chinese do not share similar values. Overall then, knowledge about China is mostly determined by demographic background factors such as education and interest in international news rather than the plain consumption of news.

The third set of hypotheses states that respondents who consume more news will hold more negative attitudes toward China's political, economic, and military power, which, in turn, should indicate more negative attitudes toward China and its people. While such issue-related attitudes should only affect perceptions of China (or its government), it is possible that such views also affect how Americans regard the Chinese people. Although such associations would be mostly irrational, Americans might not readily distinguish China's government from its people when political, economic, or military threats are considered.

As predicted, media exposure is associated with various issue-specific attitudes toward China (see Table 5). TV news, for example, correlates positively with views of China as a military threat and feeling uneasy about China being the leader in Asia. Similarly, online news is associated with the belief that China is an adversary (rather than just a problem) and that China's economic growth will eliminate jobs in the United States. Newspaper readers, on the other hand, are more likely to approve of China as a political leader in Asia.

Table 5 about here

The findings also support the second part of Hypothesis 3. As predicted, most issue-specific attitudes are associated with perceptions of China and its people (see Table 4). Respondents who see China as an adversary of the United States, for example, tend to have more negative perceptions of China and the Chinese people. Conversely, those who believe that China considers U.S. views in its foreign policy decisions and those who approve of China's political leadership in Asia think more positively about China and its people.

Conclusions

Despite decades of research on how the media might affect public perceptions of foreign nations, little is known about the exact mechanism of this relationship. This study used China as a case

study to investigate how news exposure might affect public attitudes toward a nation that has received intense media coverage in recent years due its emerging status as a global superpower. Since most people have not visited China in person, it is reasonable to assume their images of China are largely determined by the mass media. Following the arguments of previous media agenda setting and framing analyses, this study tests whether exposure to news is a significant predictor of what issues people connect with China and how they think about this nation.

First – and somewhat unexpectedly – this study found that a majority of Americans are interested in foreign affairs and news about China. This finding, of course, contradicts the conventional wisdom that most Americans are not interested in foreign affairs and track international news only when major developments occur (Pew Research Center, 2008). Moreover, this study found that respondents with more exposure to news also tend to have more interest in China. Increased interest in China, in turn, correlates with more positive perceptions of China and its citizens. Overall, these findings support the notion that negative U.S. media coverage of China may be less influential than assumed by media scholars and the Chinese government, especially among audiences interested in China.

This study also tests the assumption that associations between media exposure and attitudes toward China should be especially strong for issues that have been covered heavily in the mass media. Previous studies have not only documented this agenda setting effect, but also found that the tone of news stories can influence how people think about foreign nations (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Specifically, this study investigates whether the extensive negative media coverage of China's political and economic environment found in 2010 was reflected in U.S. public opinion about China in early 2011. As expected, the findings generally support the notion that respondents with more news exposure hold more negative perceptions of Chinese foreign

and economic policies. Especially television and online news consumption are associated with views of China as a military threat, unease with China being the leader in Asia, believing that China is an American adversary, and thinking that Chinese economic growth will eliminate jobs in the United States.

As predicted, these issue-specific attitudes also correlate with overall perceptions of China and its citizens. Respondents who believe that China considers U.S. views in foreign policy decisions and approve of China as Asia's political leader generally have more positive views. On the other hand, respondents who see China as an adversary or its economy as a threat, generally hold more negative views. Thus, issue-specific attitudes are associated with overall perceptions of China and its people, but not in consistently negative or positive ways. It therefore seems safe to conclude that media exposure could indirectly affect overall perceptions of China and the Chinese by influencing issue-specific attitudes related to China's political, economic, and military power.

This analysis also has shown that direct effects of media exposure on overall perceptions of China and the Chinese people are unlikely. While perceptions of China correlated weakly with exposure to newspaper and radio news, media use proved to be entirely unrelated to opinions about the Chinese. Such a finding might reflect the fact that most U.S. news coverage of China focuses on political or economic issues rather than the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. Consequently, U.S. coverage only interacts with American perceptions of China and its policies – but not with public attitudes toward its people.

The findings of this study also support the notion that people learn about China from the media. While exposure to traditional news media did not predict more knowledge about China, it is clear that those who use online news regularly tend to know more about this nation. Thus,

Americans who actively surf for news online seem to have an edge over those who obtain their news from more passive, traditional media.

However, the data only partially support the notion that more knowledge about China is associated with more positive perceptions of China or the Chinese. In fact, those who are more knowledgeable tend to feel less comfortable about China's leadership role in Asia, believe China is an adversary of the United States, and think China's economic growth will eliminate jobs in the United States. As a result, Americans who are more knowledgeable about China tend to be more critical of Chinese foreign and economic policies. Yet, at the same time, those who know more about China also have more positive views of the Chinese people. This finding indicates that especially informed Americans might separate their perceptions of the Chinese government and its policies from their views of the Chinese people when they consider their overall attitudes toward both.

Overall, this study found support for the notion that media exposure might play a significant role in the perceptions of China and the Chinese people. Yet the findings also indicate it would be wrong to simply assume a negative association between news exposure and attitudes toward China – as seems to be the Chinese government's preferred view. As this study shows, American perceptions of China and its people correlate in positive and negative ways, depending on the issue at hand. Moreover, Americans with more exposure to news tend to hold more positive views of China, which contradicts the assumption that the “negative” portrayal of China in the U.S. media must have a negative impact on U.S. public opinion about China.

In fact, this survey indicates that most Americans see China as a country with a rich cultural heritage and an internationally competitive economy. While most U.S. citizens hold fairly negative opinions about China's international politics and human rights record, these views

are balanced by a more nuanced understanding of China's foreign and economic policies among those who are more interested in that country. In addition, a clear majority of Americans regard Chinese people favorably, which provides hope for a better understanding between the two nations in the near future.

We believe that this distinction Americans make in their perceptions of China's government and the Chinese people is worth further pursuit. Despite the inherent difficulties in measuring the results of public diplomacy programs such as cultural exchanges and global media campaigns, the fact that the perceptual differences show so clearly in the survey data hints at a possible success of such programs. We therefore encourage future studies that will analyze this finding in more detail by focusing on potential effects of China's public diplomacy efforts in the United States and elsewhere. If indeed "the rise of China is one of the most historically significant events of our time" (Denmark, 2011), then scholars must learn more about how media coverage of China can affect American public opinion, as well as the political environment such opinion helps govern.

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Table 1: List of Topics in News About China, *New York Times* (Jan. 1, 2010 - Dec. 31, 2010)

Topic in News	# of Stories	Percent	Negative	Neutral	Positive*	Total %
Business & commerce	235	28.2	44.4	39.9	15.6	100.0
International politics	162	19.4	64.1	21.2	14.7	100.0
Internal order	136	16.3	82.8	7.6	9.7	100.0
Trade	73	8.8	60.8	24.3	14.9	100.0
National politics	38	4.6	66.7	28.7	4.4	100.0
Culture	37	4.4	17.9	66.7	15.4	100.0
Accidents & disasters	22	2.6	72.4	17.2	10.3	100.0
Censorship	21	2.5	91.3	4.3	4.3	100.0
Sports	13	1.7	35.7	64.3	--	100.0
Human interest	11	1.6	35.7	64.3	--	100.0
Health & social welfare	11	1.3	72.7	18.2	9.1	100.0
Education	11	1.3	--	81.8	18.2	100.0
Science & technology	10	1.2	30.0	60.0	10.0	100.0
Military & defense	8	1.0	33.3	33.3	33.3	100.0
Communication & media	8	1.0	66.7	33.3	--	100.0
Transportation	7	0.8	57.1	28.6	14.3	100.0
Housing	6	0.7	75.0	25.0	--	100.0
Population	5	0.6	16.7	83.3	--	100.0
Energy	5	0.6	25.0	50.0	25.0	100.0
Environment	3	0.2	100.0	--	--	100.0
Social Relations	2	0.1	33.3	66.7	--	100.0
Other	9	1.0	75.0	25.0	--	100.0
Total	833	100.0	58.0	29.7	12.3	

*Note: Only headlines of news stories were evaluated to be either positive, negative, or neutral.

Table 2: List of Sources in News about China, *New York Times* (Jan. 1, 2010 - Dec. 31, 2010)

Actors	USA	China	Other	Total
President, head of state	5.2	2.4	1.7	2.7
Members of national/federal government	37.0	26.1	8.4	21.8
Members of state/provincial/local government	4.2	3.5	1.1	2.7
Diplomat, ambassador	3.7	0.7	1.5	1.6
Representative of intern. organization	0.7	0.5	2.6	1.3
Internal order (police & justice)	1.6	7.6	1.5	4.2
Business, commerce, industry	21.8	16.0	37.8	25.2
Military & defense	3.3	1.4	1.5	1.8
Transportation	--	0.3	0.7	0.4
Health, welfare & social services	0.4	2.0	1.3	1.4
Population	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.3
Education	9.3	9.2	17.8	12.4
Media	3.0	10.2	4.1	6.5
Environment	1.3	0.5	2.4	1.3
Science & technology	1.4	1.0	4.6	2.4
Sports	1.2	1.2	2.0	1.5
Culture	2.1	3.9	2.3	2.9
Religion	--	0.7	2.9	1.4
Citizens	3.1	10.1	4.3	6.6
Others	--	2.4	1.5	1.6
Total %	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	765	1,675	1,421	3,861

Table 3: Interest in Foreign News and Attitudes Toward China (in percent)

How interested are you in news about other countries?		How interested are you in news about China?	
very interested	31.9	very interested	24.1
somewhat interested	49.7	somewhat interested	50.6
not very interested	12.4	not very interested	15.5
not interested at all	4.7	not interested at all	8.7
don't know	1.3	don't know	1.1
How worried are you that China could become a military threat to the US?		In making international policy decisions, to what extent do you think China takes into account the interests of the US?	
very worried	19.2	a great deal	5.7
somewhat worried	39.4	a fair amount	24.7
not very worried	24.1	not too much	40.7
not worried at all	8.1	not at all	17.4
don't know	9.2	don't know	11.5
Which one of the following is the leading economic power in the world?		Which one of the following will be the leading economic power in the world in 20 years?	
The US	51	Russia	2
China	30.5	India	4.3
Japan	8.5	China	43.3
Europe	6.6	Japan	6.4
India	1.7	The US	37.2
Russia	1.4	Europe	6.6
How comfortable are you with the idea of China being the leader of Asia?		How important are trade and investment with China to the US economy?	
very comfortable	7.4	very important	39.8
somewhat comfortable	22	somewhat important	40.1
somewhat uncomfortable	33.1	not that important	7.1
very uncomfortable	20.3	not important at all	3.4
don't know	17.2	don't know	9.6
Would more foreign trade and investment between the US and China increase jobs in US?		China represents	
Increase	26	large market for US firms	14.3
Decrease	46.3	source of competition for US firms	42.6
no effect	9.4	Neither	9.2
don't know	18.3	Both	21.3
		don't know	12.5
Which description comes closest to your views of China today?		Are relations between the US and China....	
China is an adversary	18	Improving	20.2
China is a serious problem but not an adversary	46.9	staying the same	47
China is not much of a problem	16.9	getting worse	18.4
don't now	18.2	don't know	14.4

Table 4: Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Respondents' Interest in China, Knowledge About China, Overall Perceptions of the Chinese, and Overall Perceptions of China

	Interest in China	Knowledge about China	Overall Perceptions of Chinese	Overall Perceptions of China
Demographics				
Sex (Female)	-.06*	-.04	-.05	.01
Age	.15***	.01	.06	-.12**
Education	.06*	.15***	.02	.01
Fully employed	-.01	.01	-.09*	-.01
Republican	.04	.04	-.13***	-.10**
Residence (City)	.08**	.06*	.01	.08*
Income	-.01	.09*	.03	.06
Discuss politics with friends	.55***	.19***	.17***	.09*
Incr. R-Square (%)	36.3***	10.3***	5.4*	5.1***
Interest in China				
Interest in international news	.64***	.12*	-.05	-.04
Interest in China	--	.09	.33***	.24***
Interest in Hu's visit to US	--	.09*	-.03	.10*
Incr. R-Square (%)	26.7***	3.9***	8.8***	5.1***
Media Exposure				
TV news	.08***	.02	-.07	-.05
Newspaper	-.02	-.06	-.02	.10**
Online news	.05*	.10***	.04	-.01
Radio news	.05*	-.01	.02	.10**
Incr. R-Square (%)	1.0***	1.0*	.01	2.0***
Issue-Specific Perceptions of China				
China cares about US in int'l policy decisions	.06***	-.06	.11***	.24***
China could become military threat to US	.08***	-.09*	-.01	-.06
Comfortable about China being leader in Asia	.08***	-.04*	.23***	.31***
China is adversary of US	.03	.10***	-.09*	-.15***
China's growth will eliminate jobs in US	-.01	.07*	-.03	-.02
China's expansion is bad for US economy	.01	.03	-.05	-.08*
Incr. R-Square (%)	1.3***	3.1***	10.9***	28.9***
Personal Knowledge & Interaction				
U.S. shares values with China	-.04	-.16***	.05	.24***
Americans share values with Chinese	.09***	.01	.31***	.06
Knowledge about China	.05*	--	.06*	.03
Interaction with Chinese	.08***	.11***	.09**	.13***
Incr. R-Square (%)	1.2***	2.4***	10.0***	6.0***
R-Square (%)	66.5***	20.8***	35.5***	47.1***
N	856	855	728	716

Note: Interest in China is measured on a four-point scale ranging from 1 = low interest to 4 = high interest. Knowledge about China is measured on a five-point scale ranging from 0 = no knowledge to 4 = a lot of knowledge. Perceptions of China and the Chinese are measured on a four-point scale (1 = very unfavorable, 4 = very favorable). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 5: Media Predictors of Attitudes Toward China ($N = 870$)

Media Use	China cares about U.S. in int'l policy decisions	China could become military threat to U.S.	Comfortable about China being leader in Asia	China is an adversary of U.S.	China's growth will eliminate jobs in U.S.	China's expansion is bad for the U.S. economy
TV news	.01	.12***	-.09*	.02	-.03	.01
Newspaper	.10***	-.02	.12***	.03	.03	-.05
Online news	.06	-.02	.03	.08*	.08*	.06
Radio news	.03	.04	.01	.06	.01	.01

Note: Table depicts standardized regression coefficients, controlling for sex, age, education, employment status, party affiliation, place of residence, income, and frequency of discussing politics. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: Google News Hits on "China", January 2000 – September 2010

Source: Google Trends. Hits per month shown, based on search with keyword "China"

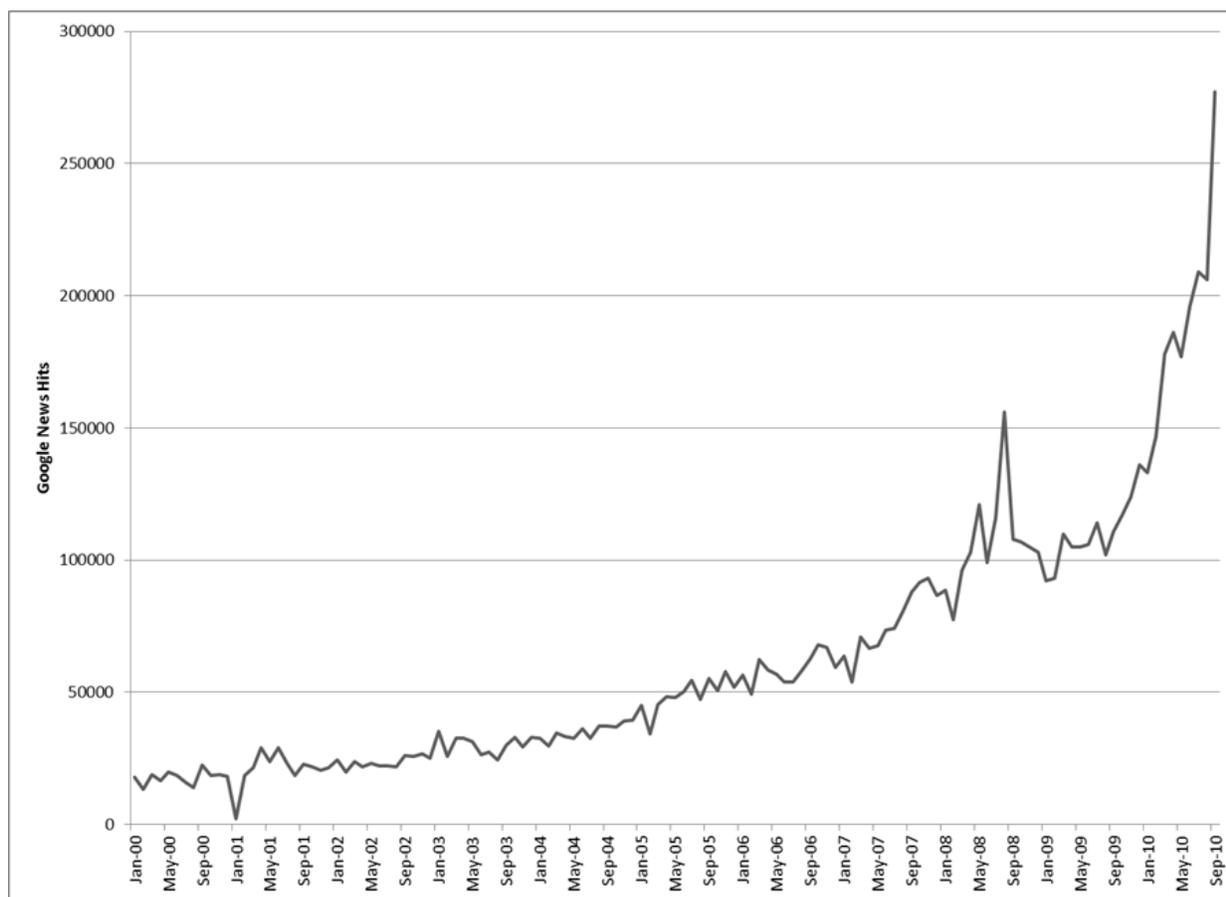
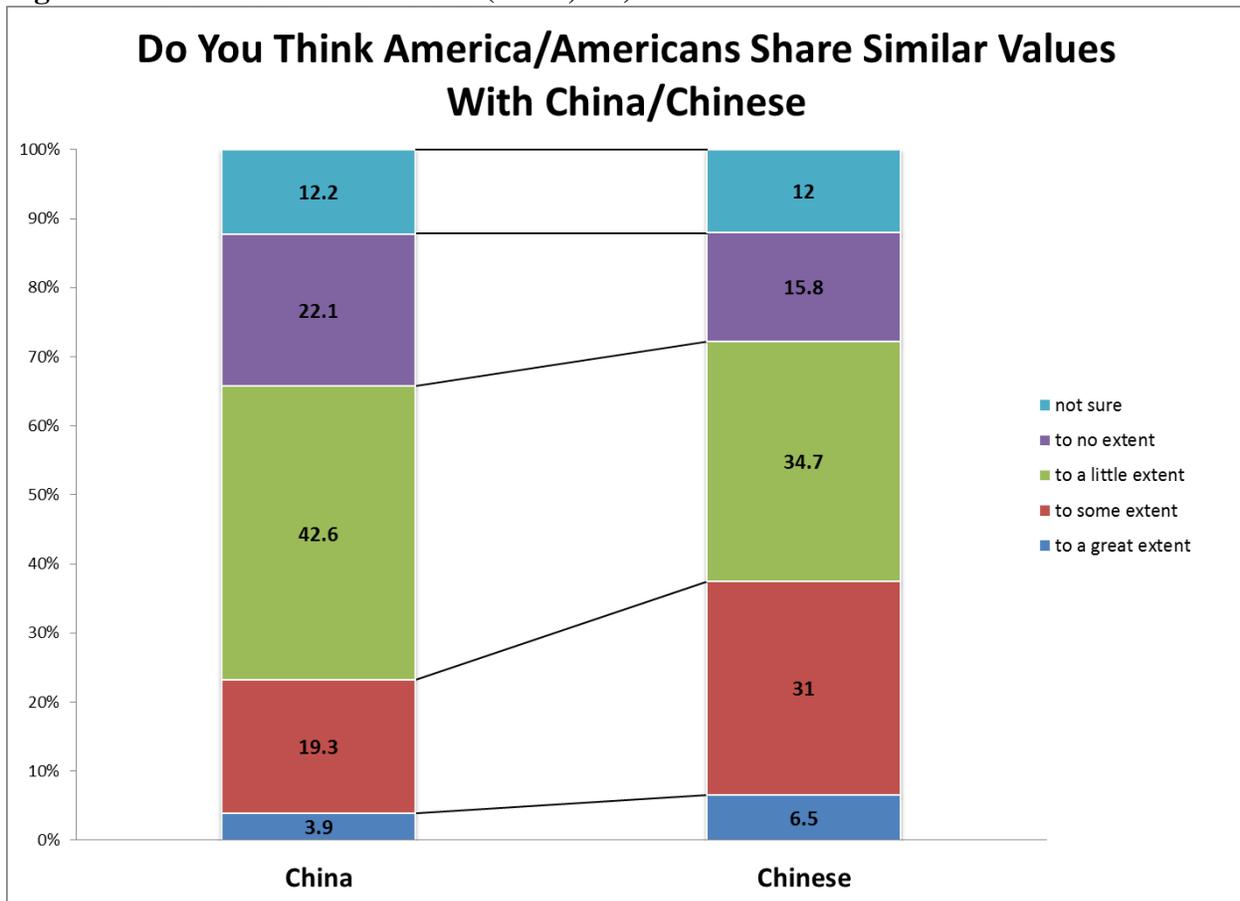


Figure 2: Perceived Shared Values (N = 1,012)



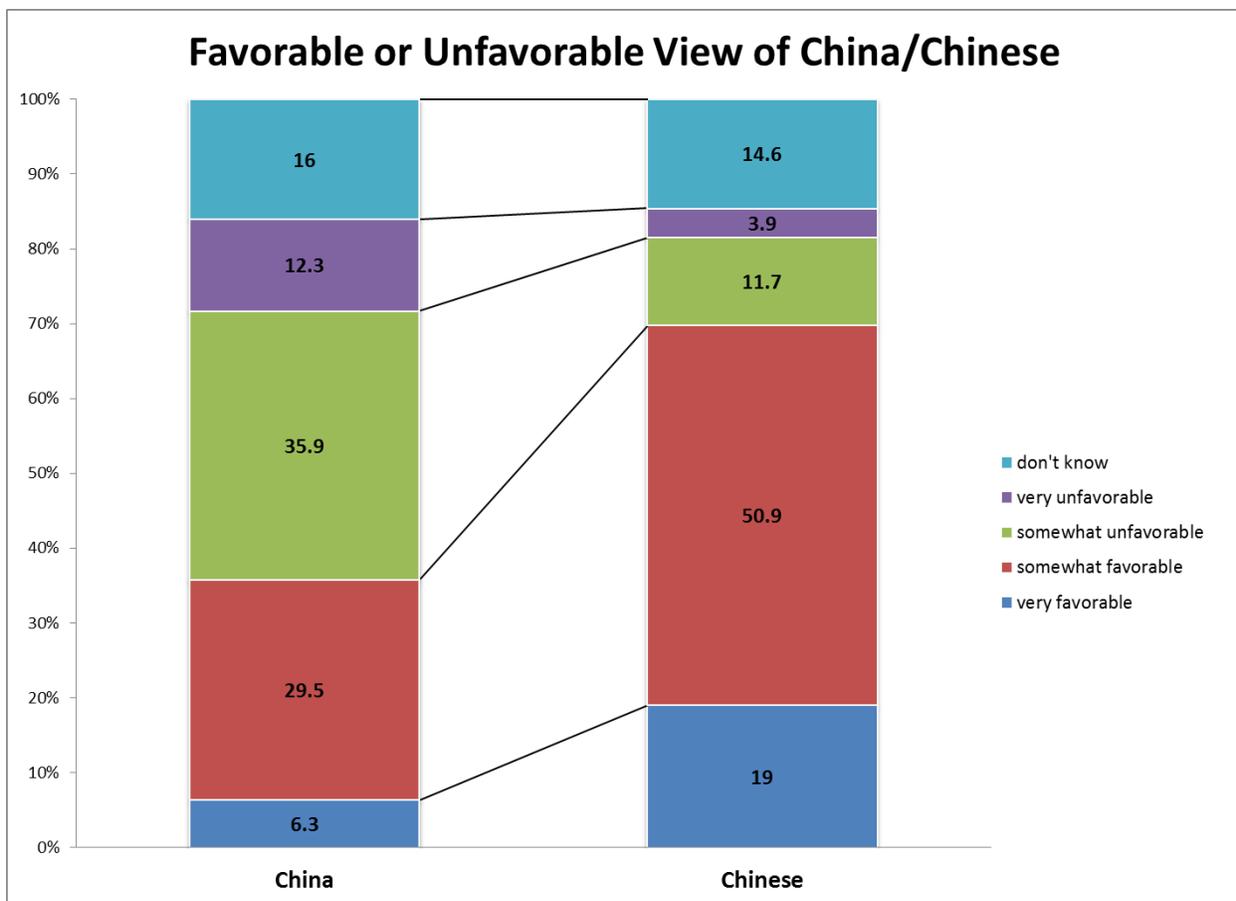


Figure 3: Overall Perceptions of China and Chinese ($N = 1,012$)

Endnotes

¹ The sample of online respondents for this study was provided by Qualtrics, which relies on census representative, 100% research-only, panels managed by ClearVoiceSurveys.com. Typical response rates for surveys based on ClearVoiceSurvey.com panels range from 15-20%. The response rate for this survey was 17.4%. Since the demographic characteristics of the final sample only deviate somewhat from the latest Census data, we decided to not weigh the data, which also keeps the analysis more simple. Respondents in this sample were invited to complete an online survey through Qualtrics, which routinely conducts online surveys for large corporations and education institutions, including many universities. The ClearVoiceSurveys.com panels from which our respondents were drawn have been told that they will be invited to participate in online surveys in exchange for various incentives. Panelists are limited to one completed survey every 10 days. Panel attrition is 8% yearly. This is calculated as total unsubscribed members plus scrubbed members (including panelists who are removed for quality issues and those who go inactive) divided by the total panel size. ClearVoiceSurveys.com panels include 540,298 panelists spread across the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, India, Turkey, the Philippines, and South Africa. Based on client specifications, samples are pulled in quota group formats. Simple randomization is used to give a representative sample of new and old members within the quota groups.

² Demographic characteristics of online sample. Education: High school incomplete (2.6%); high school graduate (19.0%); technical, trade, or vocational school (7.5%); some college (33.0%); college graduate (24.1%); post-graduate training (13.8%). Party affiliation: Republican (25.8%); Democrat (32.3%); Independent (24.5%); no preference (12.2%); other (5.3%). Race: White (83.6%); Black/African-American (5.7%); Asian (5.0%); Hispanic (3.6%); other or mixed race (2.3%). Income: less than \$10,000 (6.9%); \$10,000 to under \$30,000 (23.4%); \$30,000 to under \$50,000 (21.9%); \$50,000 to under \$75,000 (19.8%); \$75,000 to under \$100,000 (11.6%); \$100,000 or more (12.7%). Age: mean 45.8 (*std* = 17.4); 18-24 (12.4%); 25-34 (18.6%); 35-44 (19.3%); 45-54 (18.2%); 55-64 (12.4%); 65 or older (19.1%).

³ The *New York Times* is considered a newspaper of record for the United States. Numerous published studies evaluating American media coverage of foreign policy issues have chosen to analyze content from The New York Times, deeming it representative of American interpretation of international events. In order to identify all news stories in the *New York Times* that focused on China, we searched the Lexis/Nexis database for all news stories in the *New York Times* published between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2010 that contained the keywords “China,” “Chinese,” or “Beijing” in their headlines. Letters to the editor, commentaries, and editorials were excluded from the analysis.

⁴ To ensure a high reliability of the coding procedure, a subsample of 160 news stories were coded by both coders. The pretest yielded a mean intercoder reliability coefficient of .88 (Cohen’s kappa) for all variables coded. The coefficient for the three main variables topic, source, and tone were .85, .83, and .81, respectively.