

Shuo Tang* and Lars Willnat

News exposure and Americans' perceptions of China in 2019 and 2021

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Abstract

Purpose: The relationship between China and the United States has been in freefall in recent years. Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the U.S.-China trade war contributed to more negative perceptions of China among the American public. This study analyzes how Americans' news consumption and personal traits affected their general perceptions of China before and after the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 to explore how major international events might influence people's perceptions of foreign nations.

Design/methodology/approach: This study relied on data from two national online surveys conducted in the United States in early 2019 ($N = 1,250$) and 2021 ($N = 1,237$). Both surveys measure the respondents' media use, personal traits, and their perceptions of China.

Findings: The findings indicate that perceptions of China were mostly shaped by exposure to partisan and social media—rather than consumption of mainstream news media. However, these relationships were significantly stronger in 2021 than in 2019, pointing to a growing influence of the U.S. news media in U.S.-China relations. This study also found that partisanship and personal traits were strong predictors of Americans' attitudes toward China.

Practical implications: Researchers can learn from this study which variables should be included in surveys that focus on public perceptions of foreign affairs.

Social implications: This study shows that media effects and personal traits interact in complex ways to shape Americans' perceptions of China.

Originality/value: This study analyzes and compares data from two national representative samples, offering insights into how major international events might

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***Corresponding author: Shuo Tang**, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, 13210, USA, E-mail: shuotang@alumni.iu.edu

Lars Willnat, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA, E-mail: lwillnat@syr.edu

influence public opinion. It also measures the possible impact of the Chinese social media platform TikTok on Americans' perceptions of China.

Keywords: China, Covid-19 pandemic, media use, personal traits, survey, U.S.-China trade war

1 Introduction

Most research on how the news media might influence perceptions of foreign nations has focused on the relationship between exposure to news about international affairs and public opinion about foreign nations. Media scholars have suggested that people learn about the importance of global issues from the news media, which might influence the issues people consider important when thinking about foreign countries (e.g., Salwen and Matera 1992; Wanta et al. 2004). Thus, by covering the issues audiences consider important in foreign affairs, the news media can influence how people think about foreign nations.

While the media might affect how people think about other countries by presenting them with international news, perceptions of foreign nations also are influenced by preexisting beliefs that have been shaped by forces other than the media (e.g., Cuddy et al. 2009; Dovidio et al. 2010). Most Americans, for example, are likely to hold views about other nations, such as China or Russia, not necessarily because of the way the U.S. news media cover these nations, but because their perceptions are influenced by beliefs and attitudes that relate to personal characteristics, such as political beliefs (Holsti 2004). Attitudes toward foreign nations are also affected by people's personal traits, including personal experiences with foreigners, knowledge of foreign countries, or openness to foreign cultures in general (Willnat et al. 2022).

China presents an ideal case to analyze how such personal traits might interact with news exposure to affect perceptions of foreign affairs. While most Americans have not visited China (World Tourism 2021), they have likely been exposed to foreign affairs news related to China's growing economic and military power. Repeated exposure to the idea of China's rise to "superpower status" (e.g., Bahi 2021; Jones 2020; Kim 2019) likely has left deep impressions on Americans' attitudes toward China during the past decade.

Evidence of such an influence is reflected in opinion polls that have probed the changes in Americans' favorability toward China during the past five decades. Polls conducted by Gallup (n.d.), for example, show that Americans' views of China have remained relatively stable for almost three decades, but then dropped precipitously from 53% of Americans who held favorable views of China in 2018 to only 20% who

held such views in 2022. This significant drop in positive perceptions of China was likely due to the negative coverage it received in the U.S. news media after the start of the 2018 U.S.-China trade war and the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Content analyses of U.S. media coverage of China during the trade war and the pandemic found a mostly negative tone in portraying China, especially in conservative partisan news media such as Fox News and on social media platforms (Chen et al. 2021; Ha et al. 2022; Tang 2021; Willnat et al. 2022).

At the same time, social media have become important news sources for many Americans (Walker and Matsa 2021). While news on social media might be less dominated by the political views of mainstream media, it is often influenced by the personal characteristics of its consumers, who actively participate in the discussion and distribution of such news. Thus, foreign affairs news on social media might influence perceptions of China differently than foreign affairs news from traditional media sources.

The present study aims to analyze how personal traits (such as openness to foreign cultures or personal interactions with Chinese) interact with news exposure to influence how Americans think about China. We are also interested in exploring whether China's increasingly negative coverage in the U.S. news media—especially in conservative partisan news outlets and social media—might be responsible for the steep drop in positive attitudes toward China among the American public. To do so, we rely on data from two national online surveys conducted in the United States in 2019 and 2021. Because both surveys are based on the same questionnaire and comparable samples of U.S. adults, this study can trace how news coverage of the U.S.-China trade war and the Covid-19 pandemic might have influenced Americans' attitudes toward China.

2 Literature review

2.1 News exposure and perceptions of China

The effects of traditional news exposure on perceptions of foreign nations are often difficult to predict. Research suggests that foreign news is often negative and focuses on conflict (Gozenbach et al. 1992). Therefore, exposure to foreign news might have a negative impact on individuals' perceptions of a foreign country. However, previous studies also found that more exposure to foreign news is associated with an increase in people's knowledge about foreign affairs, which could mitigate the negative news coverage because knowledgeable news consumers can process information more critically (Korzenny et al. 1987; McNelly and Izcaray 1986; Perry 1989). Thus, people exposed to more foreign news might have a more nuanced understanding of foreign

affairs. As a result, their perceptions of foreign nations might not reflect the way the news media cover these countries.

The relationship between China and the United States worsened substantially after Donald Trump became president in 2017. The Trump administration not only started the U.S.-China trade war in 2018 but also blamed China for the spread of the Covid-19 virus in early 2020 (Neuman 2020). In addition, U.S. news coverage of China turned increasingly negative during the pandemic, especially when conservative news outlets followed President Trump by associating China and people of Asian descent with the pandemic. These news outlets discussed or openly used terms such as “China virus” or “Wuhan virus” to describe the origin of the Covid-19 virus (e.g., AP News 2023; Asian American Journalists Association 2020; Kim 2021; Wen et al. 2020). Moreover, a recent analysis of news coverage of China in four major American news media (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, MSNBC, and Fox News) found that all four media outlets portrayed China negatively in 2021 (Tang 2021). Because the portrait of China in the U.S. traditional news media turned sharply more negative after the launch of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018—and especially after the start of the pandemic in early 2020—Americans exposed to news about China during that period will likely hold more negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019. We therefore propose that:

H1: Exposure to news about China from traditional news sources will be associated more strongly with negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019.

Media scholars have also pointed out that especially the conservative news media contributed to anti-Asian hostility in the United States during the pandemic (Cho et al. 2021; Croucher et al. 2020; Willnat et al. 2023). According to a number of studies, the conservative Fox News carried more negative coverage of China than more liberal news media outlets such as CNN or MSNBC (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020; Ha and Willnat 2022; Tang 2021). For example, Ray and Lu (2022) found that Fox News was more likely than CNN or MSNBC to support President Trump’s trade war on Chinese goods. Fox News was also more likely than CNN or MSNBC to blame China for the trade deficit between China and the United States. Other studies also found that Fox News was more likely to associate China with the cause of the pandemic by arguing that the coronavirus originated in Chinese laboratories, a position taken by President Trump without any concrete supporting evidence (Baier and Re 2020; Cohen et al. 2020).

More importantly, recent studies indicate that such negative associations significantly affected how Americans viewed people of Asian descent during the pandemic. For example, Cho et al. (2021) found that more consumption of news about Covid-19 on Fox News was associated with perceptions of Asian Americans as an

infection risk. Similarly, Willnat et al. (2023) found that the consumption of pandemic-related news on Fox News was associated with higher levels of anti-Asian stigmatization and less favorable attitudes toward Asian immigrants.

Based on these findings that document strong associations between exposure to news about China on Fox News and more negative attitudes toward China and the Chinese people, we proposed that:

H2: Exposure to news about China on Fox News will be associated more significantly with negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019. These associations will be stronger than those observed for exposure to traditional news outlets.

Social media also have become important news sources for Americans to learn about foreign nations and cultures (Chu and Choi 2011). While news on social media might be less dominated by the polarized political views of partisan media, they also lack the gatekeeping from media professionals (Benham 2020). This made social media a prominent source of misinformation and fake news during the pandemic (e.g., Cinelli et al. 2020; Ferrara et al. 2020; Rocha et al. 2021). As various studies have shown, racist, discriminatory, and anti-Asian rhetoric has proliferated on social media since early 2020, leading to a rise of anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes in the United States (Budhwani and Sun 2020; Chen et al. 2021; Croucher et al. 2020; Willnat et al. 2023). For example, Cho et al. (2021) found that exposure to social media as a source of Covid-19 information was positively related to the stigmatization of Asian Americans: the more frequently people used social media, the more they perceived Asian Americans as people who posed a Covid-19 risk or were responsible for the current pandemic.

Based on these studies that show a strong link between the use of social media and anti-Asian attitudes, it is reasonable to argue that Americans exposed to social media content about China during the controversies surrounding the U.S-China trade war and the pandemic should have held more negative perceptions of China, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic. We therefore propose that:

H3: Exposure to news about China on social media will be associated more significantly with negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019.

While social media posts about China on Facebook or Twitter likely carried negative messages about China between 2019 and 2021, TikTok, a popular video-sharing social media platform owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, has become popular among mostly younger Americans (Guo 2022). However, some scholars suggest that the Chinese government has used TikTok to distribute pro-China propaganda campaigns among foreign social media users (Cave et al. 2019;

Melin 2021), which, if true, could influence how American users of this social network perceive the Chinese government or China overall.

Such worries seem overblown, though, especially because research on the potential effects of TikTok videos on perceptions of foreign nations is limited and has not shown any evidence that would support such a conclusion. To our knowledge, only one study (Highhouse 2023) has tested the possible effects of China-related TikTok videos on American audiences' perceptions of China. The findings of this study, which was conducted with a group of 120 American undergraduate students, indicate that exposure to pro-China TikTok videos is not associated with more positive perceptions of China. However, the author also found that those who enjoyed watching pro-China TikTok videos tended to hold more positive views of China. The author argued that the perceived authenticity and believability of the pro-China videos—rather than exposure to these videos—were responsible for their positive effects on perceptions of China.

Because of the scarcity of studies on TikTok's potential effects on perceptions of China, we decided to include a measure of TikTok usage in our study. Highhouse's (2023) inconclusive findings led us to ask the following research question:

RQ1: How did exposure to TikTok influence respondents' attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021?

2.2 Political partisanship and perceptions of China

In addition to the documented associations between media coverage of China and public perceptions of this nation, party politics has influenced how Americans think about China. While Democrats traditionally have been more open to cooperating with China on issues of international importance (e.g., bilateral trade or climate change), this is not necessarily true for Republicans. For example, the Trump administration not only started the U.S.-China trade war in 2018, but also labeled China as the economic and military "enemy" of the United States (Higgins 2019; Kessler 2019). Thus, given the current political polarization of the U.S. public, Americans likely reflect the positions of their respective parties toward China.

According to recent Pew surveys (Devlin et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2022), the U.S. public holds increasingly hostile views of China. Unfavorable views of China grew after President Trump took office in 2017 and increased dramatically from 47% in 2018 to 82% in March 2022. The surveys also indicate that the percentage of Republicans who saw China negatively reached a record high of 89% in March 2022, compared with 79% of Democrats who held negative views. Pew also found that Republicans were more likely than Democrats to describe China as an enemy (42 vs.

12%) and to support being tougher with China (67 vs. 43%). Similarly, a 2020 survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that Republicans (67%) were more likely than Democrats (47%) or independents (53%) to perceive China as a threat to the United States (Smeltz and Kafura 2020).

Overall, these findings indicate that Republicans have developed more negative views of China compared to Democrats or independents during the past years. We therefore propose that:

H4: Republicans, Democrats, and independents will hold more negative views of China in 2021 than in 2019, but the increase in negative perceptions of China will be the largest among Republicans.

2.3 Personal traits and perceptions of China

Fung et al. (2018) argue that perceptions of foreign nations are influenced by an interaction of people's news exposure and their personal traits. Based on a survey with Chinese respondents who were asked about their perceptions of the United States in 2007, the authors suggest that short-termed media exposure and stable personal traits, such as cosmopolitanism, cultural affinity, and personal experiences with the destination nation primarily influence the cognitive components of how respondents saw the United States. Willnat et al. (2022) conducted two surveys in the United States and China in 2019 to measure how such personal traits might influence perceptions of national image in conjunction with media exposure. The authors found that both American and Chinese respondents with higher levels of cosmopolitanism, cultural affinity, and foreign experiences had more favorable views of the other nation. By contrast, those with more knowledge about the other country held more negative perceptions of that nation.

Following these investigations of national image, this study tests the potential effects of four personal traits on national image: cosmopolitanism, cultural affinity, personal experiences, and knowledge about China. Due to rapid globalization over the past few decades, cosmopolitanism has become an important predisposition for understanding attitudes and behaviors toward other nations and their peoples (Leung et al. 2015). The literature contains several different conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism, such as cultural openness measured by the eagerness to learn from and engage with cultures (Cleveland et al. 2009; Skrbis et al. 2004), the tendency among individuals to see themselves as global citizens rather than citizens of a specific nation (Riefler and Diamantopoulos 2009), and a preference for international relationships and cultural diversity (Leung et al. 2015). The notion that cosmopolitanism is associated with people's perceptions of other nations is supported by

studies that found correlations between cosmopolitanism and more positive perceptions of foreign products (Cleveland et al. 2009; Jin et al. 2015). We therefore propose that:

H5a: Respondents with higher levels of cosmopolitanism will hold more positive attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021.

Studies on international relations found that political similarities (Nincic and Russett 1979) and strategic affinity (or common interests) between nations can significantly reduce the likelihood of conflict between them (Maoz et al. 2006). Similarly, the related concept of cultural affinity has been shown to positively influence consumers' perceptions of products from other nations (e.g., Oberecker and Diamantopoulos 2011). For example, based on a survey of 610 Chinese college students, Davies et al. (2021) found that individuals were more likely to see nations as friends when they considered these nations to be culturally similar to their own country. Thus, we propose that:

H5b: Respondents with higher levels of cultural affinity toward China will hold more positive attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021.

Visiting a foreign country or meeting people from other countries should familiarize people with these nations. Such intergroup contact has been found to reduce prejudice between members of traditionally opposed ethnic groups (Ata et al. 2009; Barlow et al. 2012) and to decrease intergroup anxiety and prejudice toward outgroup members (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Techakesari et al. 2015). We therefore propose that:

H5c: Respondents with more personal experience with China or Chinese will hold more positive attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021.

Finally, perceptions of foreign nations are likely to be shaped by general knowledge about other countries. According to previous studies, foreign affairs news reporting can significantly influence the process of knowing about other nations (Kunczik 2002). More knowledge about other nations, in turn, might influence the perception of these nations (Perry 1985, 1987). For example, Perry (1990) measured Americans' news consumption and attitudes toward the Soviet Union with surveys conducted in 1984 and 1986. He found that individuals more knowledgeable about the Soviet Union were more likely to hold favorable views toward that nation.

Similarly, Wei et al. (2013) found that Americans who knew more about China tended to perceive China more favorably. In contrast to these positive effects of knowledge on perceptions of other nations, Willnat et al. (2022) found that Americans and Chinese with more knowledge of the other nation tend to maintain more

negative views of the other nation. Because of these contradictory findings regarding the role of knowledge on the perceptions of other nations, we propose the following research question:

RQ2: How did knowledge about China influence respondents' perceptions of China in 2019 and 2021?

3 Methods

Data for this study come from two national online surveys conducted in May 2019 and March 2021 with a representative sample of 1,250 and 1,237 U.S. adults, respectively. Respondents were recruited by a professional survey organization providing access to representative online panels. Samples reflected quotas for age and gender that applied the latest U.S. Census data from the 2019 American Community Survey. The cooperation rate was 93% for the 2019 survey and 78% for the 2021 survey.

The final sample for the 2019 survey includes 51% females and 49% males, with a median age of 39 years. Most respondents were either high school (20.4%) or college graduates (27.6%) with a median family income between \$50,000 and \$55,000. They also were fairly representative in terms of race (72% Caucasian, 14.6% African American, 4.3% Asian, 4.1% non-White Hispanic, 5% other) and political affiliation (24.6% Republicans, 33.1% Democrats, 42.3% independents). Similarly, the sample of the 2021 survey is comprised of 50.8% females and 49.2% males with a median age of 42 years. Most respondents were either high school (20.5%) or college graduates (27.4%) with a median family income of \$50,000 to \$55,000. Again, the respondents were reasonably representative in terms of race (73% Caucasian, 15.7% African American, 2% Asian, 4% non-White Hispanic, 5.3% other) and political affiliation (24.4% Republicans, 30.5% Democrats, 45.1% independents). A comparison of the two surveys indicates they are similar in the distribution of demographic factors, even though the 2021 sample contains slightly more independents and fewer Democrats than the 2019 sample. Thus, we weighted the 2021 sample to match the political affiliation distribution of the 2019 sample to ensure that the difference in party affiliation between the two surveys would not distort our analyses.

While the overall samples compare favorably to the 2010 U.S. Census data, the final sets of respondents in both samples were slightly older, more educated, and racially less diverse than the overall U.S. population. However, a comparison with representative national polls conducted by Pew in 2018 and Gallup in 2021 revealed only minor differences in the demographic characteristics of the samples. We are therefore confident that both samples are fairly representative of the overall U.S. population.

3.1 Independent variables

3.1.1 Traditional media exposure

Exposure to traditional news media was assessed by asking respondents how many days during the past week they consumed news on national network TV (2019: $M = 3.66$, $SD = 2.59$; 2021: $M = 3.19$, $SD = 2.66$), printed national or local newspapers (2019: $M = 2.37$, $SD = 2.56$; 2021: $M = 1.78$, $SD = 2.36$), PBS (2019: $M = 2.41$, $SD = 2.57$; 2021: $M = 1.86$, $SD = 2.34$), CNN (2019: $M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.90$; 2021: $M = 2.21$, $SD = 2.53$), and online news aggregators such as Google News (2019: $M = 3.84$, $SD = 2.50$; 2021: $M = 2.72$, $SD = 2.49$).

3.1.2 Partisan media exposure

Respondents were also asked how many days during the past week they consumed news from the conservative Fox News (2019: $M = 2.60$, $SD = 2.03$; 2021: $M = 2.40$, $SD = 2.61$) and the more liberal MSNBC (2019: $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.91$; 2021: $M = 1.90$, $SD = 2.44$).

3.1.3 Social media exposure

Social media use was measured by asking respondents how many days during the past week they used social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. Responses to these items were combined in a social media use index (2019: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 2.05$, $\alpha = 0.70$; 2021: $M = 3.09$, $SD = 2.04$, $\alpha = 0.72$). In addition, engagement with news on social media was assessed by asking respondents on a 4-point scale how often (1 = never; 4 = frequently) they used social networking sites to (1) click on links to news stories, (2) post or (3) share links to news stories, (4) 'like' news stories, and (5) comment on news stories. The scores of the individual measures were combined in a social media news engagement index ranging from 1 to 4, with 4 indicating the highest level of social media news interactivity (2019: $M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.94$, $\alpha = 0.92$; 2021: $M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

3.1.4 TikTok exposure

The use of TikTok was assessed by asking respondents on a 4-point scale how often (1 = never; 4 = frequently) they used TikTok (2019: $M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.16$; 2021: $M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.20$).

3.1.5 Cosmopolitanism

Openness to foreign influences was assessed by asking respondents on a 5-point scale how much they agreed (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with four statements that have been developed in earlier studies of cosmopolitanism (Cleveland and Larochde 2007): (a) I am interested in learning more about people who live in other countries; (b) I enjoy being with people from other countries to learn about their unique views and approaches; (c) I enjoy exchanging ideas with people from other cultures or countries; (d) I find people from other cultures stimulating. Agreement with each statement was combined in a cosmopolitanism index (2019: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.83$, $\alpha = 0.91$; 2021: $M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.86$, $\alpha = 0.89$).

3.1.6 Cultural affinity

Perceived cultural differences between Americans and Chinese were measured by asking respondents to what extent (1 = no extent, 4 = great extent) they thought the United States and China shared similar values (2019: $M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.85$; 2021: $M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.85$). The measure was adopted from Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011, p. 45) who defined cultural affinity as “country-specific favorable feelings toward particular foreign countries.”

3.1.7 Personal experiences with China

To gauge the level of interaction with Chinese people, respondents were asked 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, or (e) are interested in visiting China. The answers to each of the five questions were combined in a personal interaction index ranging from 0 (no interactions) to 5 (a lot of interactions) (2019: $M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.41$, $\alpha = 0.62$; 2021: $M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = 0.62$).

3.1.8 Knowledge of China

General knowledge about China was measured with five questions that asked respondents, for example, to name China’s capital or identify China’s political system. Responses to these five items were combined in a knowledge index ranging from 0 (ill-informed) to 1 (well-informed) (2019: $M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.28$; 2021: $M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.30$).

3.1.9 Demographics

This survey included a set of demographic control variables assessing respondents' gender, age, education, race, political party affiliation, place of residence (urban/rural), and income.

3.2 Dependent variables

3.2.1 Perceptions of China

To assess overall perceptions of China, respondents were asked how favorably (= 5) or unfavorably (= 1) they viewed China (2019: $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.12$; 2021: $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.23$). Perceptions of China's economic power were measured by asking respondents how worried (1 = not worried at all, 5 = very worried) they are about China becoming an economic threat to the United States (2019: $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.04$; 2021: $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.10$). Similarly, perceptions of China's military power were measured by asking respondents how worried they are about China becoming a military threat to the United States (2019: $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.14$; 2021: $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.07$).

4 Findings

To test whether there have been significant changes in respondents' perceptions of China between 2019 and 2021, we conducted Welch's t -tests to compare the mean scores for the overall favorability of China and perceptions of China as an economic or military threat to the United States. As shown in Table 1, respondents' favorability of China was significantly lower in 2021 compared to 2019 (3.25 vs. 2.75, $t = 113.0$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, perceptions of China as an economic (3.25 vs. 3.60, $t = 58.2$, $p < 0.001$) or military threat (3.22 vs. 3.49, $t = 115.0$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly higher in 2021 than in 2019. Overall, these findings indicate that Americans' perceptions of China worsened considerably between 2019 and 2021.

To test the hypotheses concerning the possible effects of media exposure and personal traits on attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021, we developed three hierarchical regression models that predict respondents' overall favorability toward China and their perceptions of China as a military and economic threat. The models include demographic background factors such as gender (female), age, education, party affiliation (Democrat/Democrat-leaning; Republican/Republican-leaning), race (Asian or Asian-American), residency (urban), and income (Block 1); exposure to

Table 1: Mean comparison of attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021.

	Favorability of China			Military threat			Economic threat		
	2019	2021	Welch's t-test	2019	2021	Welch's t-test	2019	2021	Welch's t-test
All respondents	3.25	2.75	113.0 ^a	3.25	3.60	58.2 ^a	3.54	3.71	16.2 ^a
Democrat	3.35	3.16	5.2 ^b	3.22	3.49	11.5 ^c	3.49	3.66	5.3 ^b
Republican	3.46	2.41	96.6 ^a	3.34	3.90	35.7 ^a	3.67	4.02	16.5 ^a
Independent	3.06	2.63	46.6 ^a	3.23	3.50	17.2 ^a	3.51	3.58	1.0
Male	3.43	2.72	91.4 ^a	3.28	3.75	48.8 ^a	3.61	3.90	23.5 ^a
Female	3.08	2.78	26.5 ^a	3.23	3.45	14.0 ^a	3.48	3.53	0.7
18–49 years old	3.34	3.04	30.0 ^a	3.24	3.48	21.0 ^a	3.54	3.57	0.1
50+ years old	2.84	2.24	48.8 ^a	3.30	3.79	30.6 ^a	3.55	3.98	26.4 ^a
High school graduate	3.21	2.78	26.1 ^a	3.20	3.46	9.5 ^c	3.50	3.52	0.1
College graduate	3.27	2.73	88.0 ^a	3.28	3.66	51.6 ^a	3.56	3.80	22.8 ^a

Cell entries represent mean scores for favorability of China (1 = unfavorably, 5 = favorably) and perceptions of military threat and economic threat from China (1 = not worried at all, 5 = very worried). ^a $p < 0.001$, ^b $p < 0.05$, ^c $p < 0.01$. Democrats and Republicans in this analysis include respondents identified as Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning, respectively.

traditional (newspapers, online news, network TV, PBS, CNN) and partisan news media (Fox News, MSNBC) (Block 2); social media use (social media use, TikTok use, and social media news engagement) (Block 3); and personal traits (cultural affinity, personal experiences with China, cosmopolitanism, and knowledge about China) (Block 4).

Hypothesis 1 proposes that exposure to traditional news sources will be more significantly associated with negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019. Table 2 shows that exposure to traditional news media was not consistently associated with perceptions of China in 2019 or 2021. While exposure to online news was positively associated with perceptions of more significant economic threat coming from China in 2019 and 2021 (2019: $\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$; 2021: $\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$), all other associations were either insignificant or in a direction incongruent with the first hypothesis (such as the positive associations found between exposure to newspapers and PBS and overall favorability of China). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 states that exposure to Fox News will be more significantly associated with negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019. As Table 2 shows, the negative relationships between exposure to Fox News and perceptions of China as a military (2019: $\beta = 0.00$, n.s.; 2021: $\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$) and economic threat (2019: $\beta = -0.06$, n.s.; 2021: $\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$) became more significant between 2019 and 2021. At the same time, though, overall favorability of China was not associated with

exposure to this conservative TV news channel in either 2019 or 2021. The findings also show that exposure to Fox News was a stronger and more consistent predictor of perceived economic and military threats than other media outlets. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partly supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposes that social media use will be more significantly associated with negative views of China in 2021 than in 2019. Contrary to our expectations, the use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook (2019: $\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$; 2021: $\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.05$) and TikTok (2019: $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$; 2021: $\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) was associated with similar *positive* perceptions of China in both 2019 and 2021. While TikTok usage correlated with perceptions of economic threat in 2019 ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$), this relationship became insignificant in 2021. Interestingly, while social media news engagement was associated with more favorable views of China in 2021, it also shows significant associations with perceived economic threat in 2021 ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived military threat in 2019 ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 states that Republicans, Democrats, and independents should hold more negative attitudes toward China in 2021 than in 2019, but that the increase in negative perceptions will be the largest among Republicans. As Table 1 shows, all respondents—independent of political party affiliation—reported significantly less favorable perceptions of China in 2021 than in 2019. This was consistently true for lower levels of overall favorability of China and higher levels of perceived economic and military threat coming from China. As predicted, this drop in positive views of China between 2019 and 2021 was especially pronounced among Republicans. In fact, Republicans held the most favorable views of China in 2019, but also reported the least favorable perceptions in 2021 (Republican: $M = 3.46$ vs. 2.41; Democrat: $M = 3.35$ vs. 3.16; independents: $M = 3.06$ vs. 2.63). Republicans also exhibited the strongest jumps in perceived economic (+0.56, $p < 0.001$) and military (+0.35, $p < 0.001$) threats between 2019 and 2021 compared to Democrats (economic threat +0.27, $p < 0.001$; military threat: +0.17, $p < 0.05$) and independents (economic threat +0.27, $p < 0.001$; military threat: +0.07, n.s.).

The regression models shown in Table 2 strongly support the conclusion that Republicans turned out to be the most negative toward China between 2019 and 2021. While being Republican is positively associated with overall favorability of China in 2019 ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$), this relationship turns strongly negative in 2021 ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, associations between being a Republican and perceptions of China as an economic (2019: $\beta = 0.11$, n.s.; 2021: $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) or military (2019: $\beta = 0.02$, n.s.; 2021: $\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$) threat are insignificant in 2019, but turn highly significant in 2021. In contrast, being a Democrat is associated with more favorable perceptions of China in 2021 only ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) and none of the threats in either 2019 or 2021. Overall then, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Table 2: Predictors of perceptions of China in 2019 and 2021.

	Favorability of China		Military threat		Economic threat	
	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
Demographics						
Female	−0.25 ^a	−0.19 ^b	0.03	−0.14 ^c	−0.04	−0.13 ^c
Age	−0.01 ^a	−0.02 ^a	−0.00	0.01 ^b	0.00	0.01 ^a
Education	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.04 ^c
Democrat	0.13	0.25 ^b	−0.02	−0.02	0.00	0.01
Republican	0.19 ^c	−0.27 ^b	0.02	0.39 ^a	0.11	0.38 ^a
Asian or Asian-American	−0.51 ^b	−0.27	0.07	−0.29	0.07	0.01
Urban resident	0.26 ^a	0.30 ^a	−0.03	0.10	0.05	0.11
Income	0.02 ^a	0.01 ^b	0.02 ^b	0.00	0.01 ^b	0.01
ΔR^2 (in %)	9.0 ^a	16.9 ^a	1.7 ^c	7.6 ^a	2.1 ^b	11.7 ^a
News media exposure						
Newspapers	0.10 ^a	−0.00	0.01	0.01	−0.01	0.00
Online news	−0.05 ^b	0.04 ^c	0.03	0.01	0.04 ^b	0.03 ^c
Network TV	−0.01	−0.01	0.03	−0.02	0.03	−0.01
PBS	0.09 ^a	0.11 ^a	0.04	0.03	0.00	0.01
Fox	0.06	−0.02	0.00	0.08 ^a	−0.06	0.03 ^c
CNN	0.00	0.03	−0.04	0.01	0.04	0.02
MSNBC	0.10 ^b	0.05 ^c	0.04	−0.00	0.08	−0.03
ΔR^2 (in %)	16.1 ^a	9.4 ^a	2.7 ^a	4.7 ^a	3.3 ^a	1.4 ^b
Social media use						
Social media use	0.06 ^b	0.04 ^c	0.02	−0.03	−0.01	−0.00
TikTok use	0.28 ^a	0.30 ^a	0.13 ^b	0.04	0.05	−0.00
Social media news engagement	0.01	0.13 ^b	0.07	0.16 ^a	0.11 ^c	0.09
ΔR^2 (in %)	6.1 ^a	7.5 ^a	1.4 ^b	1.2 ^b	0.7 ^c	0.3
Personal traits						
Cultural affinity	0.38 ^a	0.47 ^a	0.02	−0.05	0.02	−0.07
Personal experience	0.15 ^a	0.12 ^a	−0.01	−0.04	−0.02	−0.04
Cosmopolitanism	0.19 ^a	0.09 ^c	0.07	0.17 ^a	0.18 ^a	0.25 ^a
Knowledge about China	−0.55 ^a	−0.84 ^a	0.04	0.08	0.23	0.29 ^c
ΔR^2 (in %)	15.3 ^a	15.7 ^a	0.3	1.5 ^a	2.0 ^a	3.8 ^a
Total R^2 (in %)	46.4 ^a	48.7 ^a	6.1 ^a	13.3 ^a	8.2 ^a	15.7 ^a
Total N	1,136	1,211	1,136	1,211	1,136	1,211

Cell entries represent unstandardized regression coefficients. ^a $p < 0.001$, ^b $p < 0.01$, ^c $p < 0.05$. Democrats and Republicans in this analysis include respondents identified as Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning, respectively.

Hypothesis 5a, 5b, and 5c propose that cosmopolitanism, cultural affinity, and personal experiences should be significantly associated with more positive attitudes toward China in 2019 and 2021. The findings support these hypotheses, but are not consistent for all types of personality traits tested. For example, respondents with

higher levels of cultural affinity (2019: $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$; 2021: $\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$) and more personal experiences with China/Chinese (2019: $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.001$; 2021: $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.001$) tend to hold more favorable views of China in 2019 and 2021. But these two traits are not significantly associated with less perceived economic and military threats coming from China. And while respondents with higher levels of cosmopolitanism also hold more favorable views of China (2019: $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$; 2021: $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.05$), they are more likely to perceive China as a military (2019: $\beta = 0.07, n.s.$; 2021: $\beta = 0.17, p < 0.001$) and economic threat (2019: $\beta = 0.18, p < 0.001$; 2021: $\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$). Thus, the findings only partly support H5a, 5b, and 5c.

The final research question explores the relationship between knowledge about China and respondents' perceptions of China. The findings suggest that individuals who know more about China tend to hold less favorable views of China in 2019 and 2021 (2019: $\beta = -0.55, p < 0.001$; 2021: $\beta = -0.84, p < 0.001$) and see China as an economic threat in 2021 (2019: $\beta = 0.23, n.s.$; 2021: $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.05$). Thus, it appears that more knowledge does not necessarily translate into more positive perceptions of China, even after controlling for partisanship and media exposure.

5 Conclusions

Our comparative analysis of how news exposure and personal traits influenced Americans' perceptions of China during the U.S.-China trade war and the pandemic found strong evidence for the notion that especially Republicans developed more negative attitudes toward China. Of course, many of these Republicans relied on Fox News as their primary source of information about China, the U.S.-China trade war, and the pandemic, which likely resulted in a feedback loop of conservative viewpoints and news coverage mostly critical of China. Thus, while exposure to other types of media, such as newspapers, PBS, and the more liberal MSNBC news was associated with more favorable views of China, it was primarily Fox News that drove perceptions of China as an economic and military threat to the United States among Republican audiences.

These dramatic changes in Republicans' attitudes toward China were likely due to the repeated attempts by former President Trump and the conservative media to blame China for the trade deficit between the two nations and the pandemic (Cohen et al. 2020; Ray and Lu 2022). After accusing China of unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft, the Trump administration imposed additional trade tariffs on China in 2018, which led to a prolonged trade war between the United States and China in the following years. Trump also linked China's growing economic power with its expanding military capabilities that threaten to undermine the position of the United States as the world's leading military power (Hass 2020). While

most of the more traditional news outlets were critical of Trump's aggressive stance against China, the conservative Fox News generally supported Trump's foreign policy goals regarding China (Willnat et al. 2022). Moreover, studies on how partisan media influenced Americans' perceptions of the trade war found that conservative media often applied conflict framing when covering China. At the same time, liberal and non-partisan news media were not consistent in framing the trade war (Ha et al. 2022). Thus, it may not be surprising that Republicans developed much more negative perceptions of China than Democrats or independents between 2019 and 2021.

It is important to remember that we found more negative perceptions of China among most of our respondents, irrespectively of their party affiliation. However, it is likely that these increasingly negative views of China were somewhat alleviated by exposure to politically more liberal or balanced media outlets, such as newspapers, online news aggregators, PBS, or MSNBC. Thus, it would be a mistake to claim that "critical" U.S. news coverage of China always leads to more negative views of this nation among the American public (AlAfnan 2020; AP News 2023; Yang and Liu 2012).

One of the biggest surprises in this study was the positive associations between social media use and perceptions of China. Both exposure to more traditional social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and the use of the newer TikTok, were associated with more favorable perceptions of China in 2019 and 2021. Similarly, respondents with higher levels of news engagement on social media viewed China more favorably in 2021. This might indicate that Americans, despite our initial expectations, have been exposed to a more nuanced and balanced portrait of China on social media—especially when compared to partisan news channels that have gained prominence in recent years. Moreover, American social media users might have encountered and interacted with people or user-generated information from around the world—in contrast to those who primarily relied on traditional or partisan U.S. media outlets. In fact, some scholars have argued that English-language social media networks present China more positively and with more diverse images than the traditional U.S. news media (Xiang 2013). Our study supports such conclusions by finding that online news users were more likely to hold favorable views of China in 2021 than in 2019.

While social media use generally correlated with more favorable views of China, our findings also suggest that users with higher levels of social media news engagement were more likely to view China as an economic threat in 2019 and a military threat in 2021. These threat perceptions might reflect the differences in how China was depicted on social media between 2019 and 2021. Before the pandemic outbreak in early 2020, the U.S. news media and the Trump administration often portrayed China as an economic threat (Higgins 2019). However, after the start of the pandemic, news coverage focused much more on China as the possible origin of Covid-19 (Cohen et al. 2020). Such a dramatic switch in news coverage likely

deemphasized discussions of China as an economic threat and thus heightened other latent threats, such as China's military power.

Our study also showed that respondents who used the Chinese social media platform TikTok were more likely to hold favorable views of China in 2019 and 2021. While social media use and engagement were associated with more favorable views of China, TikTok was a stronger predictor in both years. And while TikTok users were more likely to see China as a military threat in 2019, this association became insignificant in 2021.

This leaves the question of why TikTok users in the United States held more favorable views of China than users of other popular social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. As discussed earlier, one previous study suggests that TikTok users who liked and trusted China-related videos were more likely to have a favorable view of China (Highhouse 2023). However, it also seems possible that TikTok's way of presenting information about China—likely more persuasive, briefer, and more entertaining—contributes to the differences in associations observed. Thus, additional studies are needed to test whether TikTok content is more effective in creating positive views of China and whether TikTok users are more likely to encounter pro-China videos on this booming social media platform.

Finally, research on national image (Tang 2021; Willnat et al. 2022) suggests that the formation of a national image involves the interaction between short-term media exposure and stable personal traits, such as cosmopolitanism, cultural affinity, and personal experiences with another nation. The findings of this study generally support this notion and suggest that China's national image among the American public is more likely to be driven by personal traits than news coverage of that nation. Cosmopolitan Americans who reported more personal experience and cultural affinity with China generally viewed this nation more favorably. However, more cosmopolitan Americans were also more likely to perceive China as an economic and military threat, especially in 2021. We also found that those knowledgeable about China tended to see this country more negatively. Thus, most of these personal traits might correlate with more favorable perceptions of China overall, possibly because of China's rich history and culture. However, these personal traits do not necessarily link China's perceived favorability with other dimensions of this nation (i.e., economic and military power), especially among Republicans who are concerned about China's growing power.

Overall, our study shows that media effects and personal traits interact in complex ways with national images that defy the view of Americans as foreign policy simpletons. While it seems clear that politically conservative Americans were swayed by President Trump's attempts—in coordination with Fox News—to make China the enemy of the United States, more liberal Americans and social media users

exhibited clear signs that they could hold both favorable and critical viewpoints regarding China's rise to superpower status.

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Bionotes

Shuo Tang

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA
shuotang@alumni.iu.edu

Shuo Tang (Ph.D., Indiana University) is a postdoctoral research fellow in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. His research interests include political communication and international communication.

Lars Willnat

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA
lwillnat@syr.edu

Lars Willnat (Ph.D., Indiana University) is the John Ben Snow Research Professor in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. His research focuses on journalism studies, political communication, and comparative survey research.