PERCEPTION and Misperception in American and Chinese Views of the Other

Alastair Iain Johnston and Mingming Shen, editors
CHAPTER 3
WHOM DO WE TRUST?
TESTING FOR SOCIALIZATION EFFECTS IN CHINESE SURVEYS

Peter Hays Gries and Matthew A. Sanders

APOLOGISTS FOR THE Chinese Communist Party (CCP) often point to surveys suggesting that the Chinese people trust their government more than the citizens of many democracies trust their governments. In a 2013 *Foreign Affairs* article, Eric Li pointed to a 2011 Pew Research Center poll of Chinese attitudes to argue that the Chinese people are satisfied with their government.¹ The *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the CCP, similarly cited a survey conducted by the global public relations firm Edelman to boast that “China ranked first in the world . . . with 88 percent trust” in government.² By contrast, they went on to exult, “trust in government fell in the United States from 46 percent to 40 percent.”

Critics question the reliability of such surveys conducted in China. Yasheng Huang was blunt: “In a country without free speech,” he wrote in a *Foreign Affairs* response to Li’s article, “asking people to directly evaluate their leaders’ performance is a bit like giving a single choice exam.”³ He nonetheless went on to cite other surveys conducted in China to argue that the Chinese people desire democracy now.

Can the results of Chinese surveys be trusted? Or will they simply be fodder for both sides of the debate over one-party rule in China?

In a recent review, Yun-han Chu points to “credible international collaborative survey projects,” such as the Asian Barometer and the World Values Survey, as well as a long line of Western scholarship,⁴ to claim that “the large majority of Chinese consider the current political system to be the appropriate system for their country.”⁵
But Chu does not address the micro-foundations of critiques by Huang and others of surveys conducted in China. People will not always say publicly what they actually believe or what they will say privately. In social psychology, this phenomenon is known as compliance. Compliance may occur because situational pressures strongly motivate people to conform or because they are socially motivated to manage their impressions before others. In other words, in public settings people often distort their responses because they want to fit in with others or avoid being ridiculed.

Most survey research in China today is conducted face-to-face with a stranger. In such a context, owing to compliance, many Chinese respondents may not be willing to openly express their actual opinions due to fear of political retribution or because of strong normative pressure not to do so.

Wenfang Tang and Yang Zhang recently conducted a list experiment to test these hypotheses. They concluded that there is a strong social desirability bias in Chinese surveys, but little political bias. Like many pioneering experiments, however, theirs suffers from issues of question design. List experiments seek to shield participants from public scrutiny by asking them not to name specific items, but to simply give a total number of items. This is intended to keep the interviewer from knowing the participant’s actual beliefs. However, it is likely that the government items in each of Tang and Zhang’s questions stood out from the other items, thus failing to hide the respondent’s views from the interviewer. This may cloud the interpretation of Tang and Zhang’s experimental results, which are thus suggestive but not conclusive on the existence of social and political desirability biases in Chinese surveys.

Building on Tang and Zhang’s pioneering work, we explored two competing hypotheses about the macro-drivers of public attitudes in China. The “top-down” socialization hypothesis holds that political variables (for example, party propaganda or fear of retribution) or social variables (such as peer pressure or social conformity) drive the attitudes of the Chinese people. The “bottom-up” psychological hypothesis, by contrast, holds that individual differences shape Chinese attitudes. We find support for each hypothesis in different contexts and show how both situational and personal factors interact in shaping the attitudes revealed in Chinese public opinion surveys. Specifically, the bottom-up individual differences variable of interest in international affairs interacts with top-down variables such as education and media exposure. This leads some Chinese to toe the party, or “socially correct,” line, while others do not.

Chinese appear to be educated into greater awareness of the socially or politically acceptable position on sensitive evaluative questions in Chinese surveys. On evaluative issues like trust in foreign countries, Chinese seek the consensus group view, asking themselves, “Which countries do we trust?” Scholars and policymakers interested in reducing the likelihood of U.S.-China conflict, therefore, would be wise to pay attention to the role of the
Chinese educational and propaganda systems in constructing a view of both America and the world in general as untrustworthy and threatening. This recommendation, of course, is consistent with the work of totalitarianism theorists starting in the 1950s.10

THE U.S.-CHINA SECURITY PERCEPTIONS SURVEY

To explore bottom-up and top-down effects on Chinese survey takers, we explored data from the U.S.-China Security Perceptions Survey. Our focus was on a May 2–July 5, 2012, face-to-face survey of 2,597 adults in urban China conducted by Peking University’s Research Center for Contemporary China (RC CCC). For comparison, we explored data from a parallel Pew telephone survey of 1,004 American adults conducted April 30–May 13, 2012.

For our dependent measures, we decided to focus on two sets of questions. The first asked how much respondents thought that their country could trust a list of different foreign countries. The second, in the Chinese data set only, asked how serious a list of different U.S. threats were to China.

We chose these dependent measures for both methodological and substantive policy reasons. Methodologically, the battery of questions pertaining to trust in foreign countries was valuable because participants were allowed to choose from four continuous response categories, from “completely trust” to “don’t trust at all.” Having four options reduces the measurement error common to questions with fewer or categorical response categories.11 The list of five U.S. threats (the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific, the United States containing China’s rise, U.S. hegemony, the U.S. position on Tibet, and U.S. spying along China’s coast) also presented four response categories, from “extremely serious” to “not at all serious,” again allowing for the creation of a continuous variable for each. Averaged together the resulting five-item “U.S. threat” scale had good internal reliability.12

Substantively, international cooperation and conflict in the twenty-first century hinge in large part upon whether Chinese and Americans view each other, and foreign countries more generally, as trustworthy or not. One reason that most structural and offensive realist international relations theorists are so pessimistic about the prospects for international peace is that they believe that the very structure of the international system dictates that there is “little room for trust among states.”13 Liberal international relations theorists, by contrast, have suggested that the “democratic peace” rests in part on the citizens of liberal democracies sharing common norms and thus being more trusting of each other.14 Alex
Wendt and other constructivist international relations theorists argue that trust between states can be created through repeated social interactions and reciprocity, facilitating cooperation. While there has been some research on how much Americans trust other countries, more empirical work is needed to better understand how trusting both Americans and Chinese are toward foreign countries.

EXPLAINING PATTERNS OF TRUST AND MISTRUST IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

On average, the urban Chinese participants in the 2012 RCCC survey mistrusted foreign countries, but the extent of their mistrust varied both meaningfully and substantially (see figure 1). The sequence of countries, with Japan the least trusted, followed by the Philippines, the United States, and Vietnam, makes intuitive sense, as does urban Chinese participants viewing Russia and Pakistan as the most trustworthy, though even they were not to be trusted either (2.5 is the scale midpoint). This pattern of differences was very large. For instance, Russia was trusted massively more than Japan (2.6 for Russia on a 1-to-4 scale versus 1.6 for Japan).

FIGURE 1: URBAN CHINESE MISTRUST MOST COUNTRIES, BUT SOME MUCH MORE THAN OTHERS

Note: Bars represent means for the full urban Chinese sample, in ascending order. The dashed line represents the neutral midpoint of 2.5 on the 1-to-4 scale.
We also created a composite scale for trust in all ten foreign countries and found that its mean ($M = 2.06$) was well below the scale midpoint of 2.5. That the Chinese participants in the survey were extremely mistrustful of the ten countries listed is consistent with national narratives of Chinese victimization at the hands of foreigners. Of course, a list of ten different countries may have produced a different result. But given the massive size of the differences revealed here, it seems likely that any ten foreign countries would be substantially mistrusted.

Americans, meanwhile, trust some countries but mistrust others. The sequence in the corresponding pattern in the U.S. general population survey conducted by Pew in 2012 also makes intuitive sense, with Pakistan the least trusted, followed by China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia (see figure 2). Britain was the most trusted, followed by fellow democracies Japan, Israel, France, and India. Overall variation was again massive, with Britain vastly more trusted than Pakistan (3.3 for Britain on a scale of 4.0 versus 1.6 for Pakistan). Compared with the scale midpoint of 2.5, Americans were only very slightly mistrusting of the nine countries included in the battery. Americans trust some countries but mistrust others.

FIGURE 2: AMERICANS TRUST SOME COUNTRIES AND DISTRUST OTHERS

Note: Bars represent means for the full U.S. sample, in ascending order. The dashed line represents the midpoint of 2.5 on the 1-to-4 scale.
At the aggregate level, therefore, both the Chinese and U.S. data vary both substantially and meaningfully. But what about the individual level? What are the individual-level predictors of trust in foreign countries?

In the U.S. data, demographic variables significantly predict trust in our nine foreign countries, on average accounting for a substantial 6.5 percent of the variance in trust for the average foreign country. For instance, gender significantly predicts three country ratings, age predicts seven, being black predicts two, being Hispanic predicts four, income predicts two, and education predicts four. This sizable impact of demographic variables is consistent with other surveys of American feelings toward other countries.24

Similar individual differences variables fail, however, to predict any variation at all in trust in foreign countries in the Chinese data. On average, in China demographics predict less than 1 percent of the variation in trust in any of the ten foreign countries in the RCCC survey. Gender, age, and education predict just two country ratings each, while being a member of a minority group, a member of the CCP, and income predict just one country each.

This is puzzling. For instance, one might think that older Chinese, having personally experienced the Cold War, might be less trusting of “American imperialists” (美帝) and “Soviet revisionists” (苏修) than younger generations with no direct experience of those conflicts and plenty of exposure to American popular culture. But age had no effect on trust in either the United States or Russia.25

Other individual difference variables exhibit the same pattern, accounting for variation in trust toward foreign countries in the U.S. sample but not Chinese sample. For instance, in the U.S. sample, self-reported ideology (conservative to liberal) significantly predicts six of the nine foreign country ratings over and beyond the effects of the demographic variables that could predict the outcome, accounting on average for 1.5 percent of unique variance in the country trust-dependent measures. By contrast, in the Chinese sample, a similar self-reported ideology question (“conservative” [保守] to “open” [开放]) does not significantly predict any country ratings.

That raises the question of whether the failure of such individual difference variables to predict trust in foreign countries is due to poor measurement or because they simply matter less in the Chinese context.

Further analyses revealed that the demographic variables all appear to have been well measured because they do predict other variables in the Chinese data set, both substantially and in the expected directions. For example, the 2012 RCCC survey included the question, “Over the past month, how frequently did you obtain international news from the following sources?” The five sources, rated on a five-point scale from “very frequently” to “not at all,” were newspapers and magazines, books, TV, the Internet, and mobile phone texting and mobile Internet. To control for individual differences in either over- or
underreporting news consumption, we added all five responses together to create a measure of total self-reported international news consumption, and then divided each of the five sources into it and multiplied by 100, creating a “percent of international news” from each media source variable for each.

Age was a powerful predictor of the percentage of international news consumption respondents reported from old media (newspapers and magazines) and new media (the Internet and mobile devices) and in the expected directions: greater age was strongly associated with greater consumption of old media and much less consumption of new media (see figure 3). Education, furthermore, was strongly associated with getting a greater share of one’s international news from new media. Together, all the demographic variables accounted for 11 percent of the variance in the percentage of news from old media versus a remarkable 32 percent of the variance in the percentage of international news from new media.

**FIGURE 3: DEMOGRAPHIC PREDICTORS OF THE PERCENT OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS CONSUMPTION FROM OLD AND NEW MEDIA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>% International News from Old Media</th>
<th>% International News from New Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>-.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Male</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.04**</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>-.01**</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.03**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p < .01, * p < .05, n.s. = not significant; all other p’s < .001. Line thickness reflects the size of the standardized β. Old media are newspapers and magazines; new media are mobile phone texting and the Internet.

Similar results can be found for participant ratings of subjective interest in and attention to international affairs. The RCCC survey included the questions: “Are you interested in international news?” and “To what extent do you pay attention to international affairs?” These two items cohered well and were substantially predicted by every demographic variable as well as the ideology variable, accounting for a full 13 percent of its variance.

So why would demographics and other individual difference variables such as ideology matter substantially for some variables (for example, media consumption) but not at all for others (trust in foreign countries)? One possibility is that the type of question matters.
Social psychologists have shown that people think differently about objective questions than they do about evaluative questions. When people answer objective questions, they rely on factual data, but when they answer evaluative questions they tend to rely upon external authorities or the preferences of salient others. In other words, the type of question may affect how people respond to it.

Consider the question, “Over the past month, how frequently did you use the following media to gather international news? . . . Internet.” The question is objective/factual. To answer it, a Chinese respondent would most likely rely upon his or her actual experiences. The respondent might read a fair amount of international news on the Internet, while the respondent’s parents may read hardly any news on the Internet. In other words, individual differences in people’s experiences should predict their responses to objective questions.

By contrast, “To what extent do you believe that China can trust the following countries? . . . Russia” is a very different kind of question. It involves emotion and is ultimately an evaluation of how a Chinese respondent imagines China’s relationship to Russia. So we might expect respondents to rely more upon other people’s preferences, values, and authority in responding to such questions. Individual differences in personality may matter less, especially if strong social or political pressures are shaping an individual’s response. This effect may be stronger in China than the United States due to China’s more collectivist social context.

In short, demographics were properly measured and do matter in China. Not all Chinese are alike. When asked objective questions, Chinese seem more likely to show variation in their responses. They likely rely on their actual behaviors, as there is no reason to try to manage one’s impression about media consumption. However, when Chinese respond to evaluative questions such as the RCCC country trust question, they seem more likely to rely upon the views of others. They then respond with attitudes that are unrelated to who they are (such as their age and gender) or what they believe (such as conservative or open ideologies).

**TESTING FOR TOP-DOWN SOCIALIZATION EFFECTS**

If greater education or media exposure was associated with responses closer to the group mean, it would be strong evidence of socialization effects. It would imply that pressure from social or political institutions is exerting a top-down influence on participant responses. We therefore created a mean deviation score for each trust variable in the Chinese
data set. To do so, we subtracted the mean score for each country trust variable from each participant’s individual rating of trust in that country and took the absolute value of the resulting difference score. With this measure, higher values represent scores farther from the sample mean, and lower scores represent scores closer to the sample mean. This measure is useful because it can reveal how differences in socialization (the “Big Brother” effect) shape participant responses relative to the group mean, regardless of whether that consensus view is socially or politically constructed.

These ten difference scores were averaged together to create a reliable scale that we regressed onto our five demographic variables (age, gender, income, being a member of a minority group, or being a CCP member), education and total international news consumption (our variables of primary interest), and individual differences in interest in international affairs and openness-conservatism. This model allows for a strong test of the effects of socialization (for example, education and media) versus personality (interest and ideology). If socialization is occurring in the Chinese population, greater education and/or media exposure should predict answers closer to the sample mean.

The overall regression model for the transformed country trust ratings was significant. There was a small main effect of gender (women scored slightly closer to the group mean than men), but no other demographic variable significantly predicted an individual’s deviation from the group mean. Among the socialization variables, education as well as quantity of news from television significantly predicted the deviation scores. Additionally, there was a marginal effect of quantity of news from newsprint in the opposite direction. As expected, Chinese respondents who had more education and who got more of their news from television were more likely to give responses closer to the group mean. Surprisingly, the opposite was true of people who got more of their news from newsprint. They were marginally more likely to give responses further from the group mean. Perhaps they were reading fewer official and more commercial newspapers and magazines. Personality differences had no effect at all.

These results suggest that in China, top-down socialization through education may be overriding individual differences in personality in accounting for responses to evaluative questions like how much China should trust specific foreign countries. However, a parallel regression was conducted using the U.S. threat scale as the dependent measure, and there were no significant effects.

To resolve this inconsistency, we sought out other sources of data to test for replicability. We first analyzed a convenience Internet sample fielded in China in fall 2013. The sample of 187 Chinese was relatively well educated and was not representative of the larger population (70 percent were male and the average age was twenty-three). Participants were asked to indicate how coolly or warmly they felt toward the United States and three other countries (Canada, Brazil, and South Africa) on a 0 (cool) to 10 (warm) feeling thermometer
We created the same deviation scale described above and regressed it onto our demographic variables of gender, age, income, and education. As expected, only education significantly predicted the deviation scores. In other words, even in a sample suffering from range restriction on education level, greater education was substantially associated with responses closer to the group mean, again suggesting a top-down socialization effect.

The Asian Barometer survey provides further support for a socialization effect. In its 2006 nationally representative face-to-face survey, Chinese participants rated, on a scale of 1 (“don’t trust at all”) to 4 (“trust a lot”) how much they trusted their central and local governments as well as the dominant political party. Age and education significantly predicted deviation from the group mean. Again, more educated participants were more likely to respond closer to the average view.

To compare these Chinese results with a U.S. sample, we also conducted a parallel analysis with Pew’s 2012 U.S. general population data. We regressed a scale of the same deviation scores for trust in the nine foreign countries listed in figure 2 onto gender, age, income, ethnicity (Hispanic), and race (black), as well as education and ideology. Education did not significantly predict the mean difference scores, though the relationship was in the same direction. However, ethnicity and race predicted greater distance from the group mean, while income predicted greater harmony with the group consensus. These U.S. findings further support the idea that individual differences such as ethnicity, race, and income shape country trust attitudes in the American context, contrasting their lack of effect in the Chinese data.

Taken together, these analyses provide evidence for a group socialization effect on evaluative questions in the Chinese context—but not the American context. Greater exposure to the Chinese educational system is repeatedly associated with greater congruence between a Chinese respondent’s individual response and the group mean. This was the case across three independent Chinese samples using three distinct dependent measures: country trust (RCCC 2012 data), warmth toward foreign countries (University of Oklahoma 2013 data), and trust in the Chinese government (Asian Barometer 2006 data).

The only exception was the U.S. threat scale in the RCCC 2012 data, where education did not predict deviation from the group mean. This anomaly may be due to question design. The question asked for assessments of the seriousness of eight “problems” (问题) that China faces. Six of the eight questions, however, referred specifically to the United States, one explicitly describing the United States as “hegemonic” or “bullying” (霸权), perhaps constructing the very U.S. threat the question sought to measure. Indeed, our five-item U.S. threat scale was substantially skewed toward the threat end of the distribution.
Given convergent evidence across three independent samples, it seems reasonable to conclude that education systematically shapes Chinese responses to evaluative questions. The more educated a participant was, the more likely the participant was to respond closer to the group mean. We did not find any direct effect of news consumption, however. Although correlational data such as these cannot test the precise reasons that educated participants are more likely to respond this way, we can conditionally say that there is likely a top-down socialization effect of the Chinese government or Chinese society on evaluations made by Chinese survey respondents—or both factors.

A PERSON-BY-SITUATION APPROACH

While individual differences such as age and gender did not have direct effects on evaluative questions like trust in foreign countries in the RCCC 2012 data, and there is convergent evidence that top-down socialization pressures are at work, could individual differences interact with socialization variables in shaping evaluative attitudes? In other words, might different kinds of Chinese respond to the same socialization pressures in disparate ways?

Research in social psychology shows that the content of the messages people receive from their social environment does not affect everyone the same way. For the messages to shape their attitudes, people need to interpret them. According to Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo’s Elaboration Likelihood Model, when people process information “peripherally,” they tend to do so in a shallow way, using simplifying heuristics.38 Fittingly, people processing peripherally tend to be easily influenced by humor or weak arguments or by social authorities. In contrast, when people process information “centrally,” they pay attention to the content of the message and are more persuaded by strong, factual arguments that present a solid case for an issue.

To process centrally, a person must be motivated to pay attention to the situation. This might occur because the information is self-relevant or because the person simply tends to think in a deep way about issues.39 In addition, people who are motivated to pay attention to arguments tend to form more positive attitudes toward persuasive arguments, while those who are less motivated tend to form more negative attitudes. In short, personal motivation affects whether people pay attention to the messages they receive, and that in turn shapes the attitudes they ultimately endorse.

Interestingly, the quantity of arguments people are exposed to can shape their attitudes as well. With “mere exposure” to a stimulus, people typically form more positive attitudes toward it.40 In the persuasion context, Cacioppo and Petty showed that people exposed to a few arguments tended to form positive attitudes and favorable thoughts toward them.41 However, as the number of arguments participants were exposed to increased, the number
of their unfavorable thoughts increased as well, leading to more negative attitudes. This supports the notion that people actively interpret the information they receive. Quantity of exposure can shape the valence of resulting attitudes, in both positive and negative directions.

Threat can also moderate the impact of mere exposure on attitudes. Richard J. Crisp and colleagues showed that repeatedly exposing British participants to French names increased liking for those names. However, if participants were threatened by first being told that French people did not like British names, the effect reversed. That is, under threat greater exposure led to more negative attitudes toward the stimulus. Thus, whether a person feels threatened will affect how exposure to information shapes the person’s attitudes and beliefs.

As for how this might connect to attitudes toward foreign affairs, Chinese education and media may paint a picture of foreign countries that makes them seem less trustworthy, and the United States specifically as threatening. However, only people who pay attention to the content of those messages should adopt these negative views. This is most likely to be the case with people who are highly interested in international affairs. Presumably, these people see news about other countries as self-relevant and potentially threatening. So they likely rely on the central route to persuasion and can be expected to assimilate the perspectives they receive from their education and the media.

That might not be the case with all Chinese people, though. Among Chinese less interested in international affairs, a different pattern could arise. Because the information they are exposed to is less self-relevant for them, they could process it peripherally. In that case, the content of the messages will matter less. Merely being exposed to information could show the opposite effect of those who process centrally: greater education and news consumption could lead to more positive attitudes toward foreign countries like the United States. Specifically, merely mentioning the United States could be associated with more positive views of the country.

In sum, we propose a person-by-situation interaction in accounting for international evaluations. Chinese attitudes will be the product of both the person (that is, the person’s interest in foreign affairs) and the sources of socialization the person is exposed to (education level, exposure to international news, or both). These variables should interact to predict participant attitudes. The content or valence of the messages that participants receive should matter more among those more interested in international affairs, while the mere exposure effect should matter more for people who are less interested.

To explore these hypotheses, we conducted a series of hierarchical linear regressions using interest in international affairs (person variable), education (situational variable), and news consumption (situational variable) as our predictors of primary interest. In these analyses, we relied on the raw (that is, non-transformed) data from the survey. In the first step of
the regressions, we entered the demographics: gender, age, income, and the dummy variables for being a CCP member or a member of a minority group. In the second step we entered education, news consumption, and interest in international affairs as main effects. In the third step we entered three interaction terms into the regression. This allowed us to test under what specific circumstances education, interest, and media consumption shape judgments of trust and threat from foreign countries in general, and the United States in particular.

It turns out that the six standard demographic variables accounted for almost no variation in our three dependent measures: a scale of trust in ten foreign countries, a scale of five items tapping the U.S. threat, and a single item tapping trust in the United States (see table 1). However, education, news consumption, and interest in foreign affairs interacted in different ways to predict all three of our dependent variables. We address each in turn.

**TABLE 1: REGRESSIONS OF TRUST AND THREAT VARIABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trust in Ten Foreign Countries ( (α = .87) )</th>
<th>U.S. Threat ( (α = .83) )</th>
<th>Trust U.S. ( N = 2,245 )</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( N = 1,665 )</td>
<td>( N = 1,765 )</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP membership</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>( ΔR^2 )</td>
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<td>.004</td>
<td>.009</td>
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<td>Interest in foreign affairs</td>
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<td>-.07 *</td>
</tr>
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<td>News consumption</td>
<td>.13 ***</td>
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<td>.14 ***</td>
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<td>( ΔR^2 )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total ( R^2 )</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \). Betas listed are standardized and from the final step of the regression. Only significant betas are reported.
Trust in Foreign Countries
In terms of overall trust toward ten foreign countries, there was a small but positive main effect of total news consumption. Participants who consumed more media tended to trust other nations slightly more.

This main effect was qualified, however, by a significant interaction between education and interest in international affairs (see figure 4). Among participants who were less interested in foreign affairs, greater education was associated with greater trust in foreign countries. The reverse was true, however, among those more interested in foreign affairs: for them, greater education was associated with less trust in foreign countries.

FIGURE 4: INTEREST IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND EDUCATION NEGATE EACH OTHER

Education level thus has opposing effects on different types of Chinese people. Among those less interested in foreign affairs, greater education is associated with greater trust in foreign countries. In terms of Petty and Cacioppo’s Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion, these people likely respond peripherally. Not paying much attention, the mere exposure effect suggests that they ignore the negative content of educational messages and simply become more familiar with, and thus more trusting of, the foreign countries they hear more about.

However, the opposite is the case among those Chinese citizens who indicate high interest in foreign affairs. The more education they have, the more convinced they become that other nations are not to be trusted. In terms of Petty and Cacioppo’s Elaboration
Likelihood Model of persuasion, these people are engaging the central route and assimilating the messages they receive: as those more interested in international affairs are exposed to more education, they become more convinced that other nations are self-interested and cannot be trusted.

The slopes, notably, are in opposite directions. Taken together, interest in international affairs and education negate each other, so there was no direct effect of either on trust in foreign countries. These opposing effects may help explain why there is little effect of demographic or ideological variables on evaluative attitudes in the Chinese data set: people with different motivations believe opposing things—canceling each other out in the full sample level.

America: The “Beautiful Imperialist”
In terms of the threat posed by the United States, Chinese who were more interested in international affairs tended to evaluate the United States as slightly more threatening than those with less interest in international affairs. This main effect was qualified, however, by a significant interaction between news consumption and interest in international affairs, with news consumption affecting people differently based upon their subjective motivation.

When news consumption was low, there were no differences among participants (see figure 5). When news consumption was high, however, people with high interest in international affairs found the United States more threatening, while people with low

**FIGURE 5: GREATER INTEREST IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS WAS ASSOCIATED WITH A GREATER PERCEPTION OF THREAT FROM THE UNITED STATES—but only among those who consumed more international news**
interest in international affairs found the United States less threatening.\textsuperscript{51} Once again, those who were more interested seemed to be processing centrally: the more they were exposed to international news, the more they perceived a rival nation such as the United States as threatening. However, people who were less interested in foreign affairs seemed to be processing peripherally: with more exposure to news, they tended to see the United States as less threatening. In short, different motivations led to different attitudinal outcomes.

Given that U.S.-China relations are the most important state-to-state relationship of the twenty-first century, we also decided to examine the Chinese survey’s single item measure of trust in the United States.\textsuperscript{52} Looking back at table 1, there were positive main effects for education and total news consumption.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, both greater education and greater news consumption were associated with greater trust in the United States. However, there was a negative main effect of interest in foreign affairs: those more interested in foreign affairs tended to trust the United States less.\textsuperscript{54}

These main effects were qualified, however, by a significant interaction between news consumption and interest in international news.\textsuperscript{55} Among those less interested in foreign affairs, higher news consumption was associated with greater trust in the United States (see figure 6). International news consumption, however, did not affect the attitudes of participants more interested in foreign affairs. This finding again suggests a “mere exposure” effect among Chinese who are high in news consumption but low in interest: they process information peripherally, ignoring the negative content of messages. The more they hear the United States mentioned, the more trusting they become of it.

\textbf{FIGURE 6: GREATER NEWS CONSUMPTION IS ASSOCIATED WITH GREATER TRUST IN THE UNITED STATES—BUT ONLY AMONG THOSE LESS INTERESTED IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS}
CONCLUSION: “BIG BROTHER” IN CHINESE SURVEYS

Advances in the sampling methods used by the Research Center for Contemporary China, the Asian Barometer, and the World Values Survey have been substantial. Yet these surveys continue to be conducted face-to-face, introducing the problem of self-presentation effects. That approach inherently raises the possibility that respondents hide their true attitudes from strangers, due to either the fear of political repercussion or a social desire to conform.

What are the primary drivers of Chinese attitudes? Do “bottom-up” psychological variables, such as individual differences in interest in international affairs or demographic variables like age and gender, shape Chinese attitudes? Or do “top-down” political or social pressures smother individual differences in shaping the attitudes of the Chinese people?

Based on the analysis of four independent data sets, with a focus on the 2012 RCCC’s contribution to the U.S.-China Security Perceptions Survey, we find that the answer is highly contingent. When it comes to relatively objective questions, such as how frequently a respondent consumes different media sources, or how interested the respondent is in international affairs, bottom-up demographic characteristics matter. For instance, age was very substantially and positively associated with consumption of old media, and strongly negatively related to the use of new media. So face-to-face surveys conducted in China can produce reliable results revealing expected differences between various types of people.

Yet there was also substantial support for a top-down “Big Brother” socialization effect in all three Chinese samples. When it came to evaluative questions, such as how much a respondent trusted his own government or a list of foreign countries, the bottom-up demographic differences regularly found in U.S. surveys did not appear. For instance, while trust in a list of ten foreign countries varied both substantially and meaningfully at the aggregate level, at the individual level age, gender, and other demographic variables could not explain any variation at all in trust in foreign countries.

Among our demographic variables, education best explains this group consensus effect on evaluative questions. Across three independent Chinese samples, we found that more years of education was the only variable associated with responses closer to the group mean. This finding provides strong support for a top-down socialization effect: when it comes to sensitive evaluative questions, Chinese appear to be educated into greater awareness of the socially or politically acceptable position.
Intriguingly, however, individual differences in the bottom-up psychological variable of interest in international affairs interacted with top-down socialization variables of education and quantity of news consumption in shaping even evaluative attitudes. Whether the dependent variable was trust in the United States, trust in all ten foreign countries, or how threatening the respondent viewed the United States, it was only those Chinese dispositionally interested in international news who processed the messages they received centrally, assimilating an attitude of mistrust toward the United States and the world.

By contrast, those Chinese less interested in international affairs appear to have processed the socialization messages they received peripherally, ignoring the negative content of the messages. Indeed, there appears to have been a passive “mere exposure” effect, in which increased exposure to news about America contributed, ironically, to greater familiarity with and trust in America. It is also possible, of course, that those with less interest in international affairs responded actively with reactance against the negative evaluations of America and the world they were exposed to, deliberately increasing their trust.57 Our correlational data cannot tell us why those Chinese dispositionally less interested in international affairs responded to greater news consumption with greater trust in the United States and the world—only that the pattern was consistent across a range of international attitudes. We suggest that it is because these people engage in peripheral processing, so that the mere exposure effect makes them more familiar with and thus more trusting of foreign countries.

In short, while demographic variables such as age clearly matter for objective questions like news consumption, and dispositional differences in people’s interest in international affairs do shape evaluative questions such as the extent of trust in foreign countries, we find that Chinese responses to evaluative questions are shaped by top-down socialization pressures. Education predicted less deviation from the group mean, but news consumption did not. Therefore, at least in the RCCC survey, the educational system seems to be a greater influence shaping participant attitudes than the media.

Alas, this analysis cannot identify exactly who “Big Brother” is. It could be the CCP, with its extensive educational and propaganda apparatus, powerfully shaping evaluative attitudes.58 But it could also be “Zhang Three and Li Four,” the imagined disciplining eyes of the typical Chinese on the street—of society as a whole. Social pressures to conform, which are so well documented in the West,59 are likely even stronger in China, where collectivist norms are more prevalent.60

In sum, when asked sensitive evaluative questions like how much they trust their local and central governments or different foreign countries, Chinese survey respondents appear more likely than American respondents to ask themselves, “Whom do we trust?,” and search for the socially or politically desirable response, rather than answering based on their own opinion.
While not all Chinese respond to it in the same ways, the Chinese educational system appears to play a major role in socializing the Chinese people into a “correct” view of the world. Chinese and American scholars and policymakers who seek to avoid another U.S.-China conflict, therefore, should pay more attention to the role of the Chinese educational system in “securitizing” international affairs: constructing a vision of a threatening world full of untrustworthy states. Over the long run, reforming Chinese school textbooks and other propaganda materials, such as movies and newscasts, could go a long way toward easing Chinese mistrust of the world in general and the United States in particular.

NOTES


5 Yun-han Chu, “Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate Over the Chinese Model,” Asian Barometer Working Paper Series 52, Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica and Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University, 2011.


10 See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1951).

11 The two intermediate categories were “somewhat trust” and “don’t really trust.” While the four response categories are technically categorical, they are presented and thus most likely understood as representing a continuum of trust that the respondent must refer to in answering the interviewer’s question. This is particularly true in the context of a lengthy rating scale where the interviewer repeatedly prompts country names without necessarily repeating the answer categories.

12 Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ is an index of the internal consistency or reliability of the items that together form a scale. Values range from 0 to 1, with those closer to 1 reflecting less random “noise” (that is, unreliability) in the measure. Alphas of .60 or higher are generally desirable. However, longer scales artificially inflate the alpha, so lower scores on shorter scales can also be acceptable.


17 $F(9, 1664) = 552.20, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .25$. Partial eta squared ($\eta_p^2$) is an effect size statistic used in reporting of analysis of variance (ANOVA) results. $\eta_p^2$ of .1 can be interpreted as small, .06 as medium, and .14 as large. So .25 is extremely large.

18 $t(2015) = 49.86, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.48$. A Cohen’s $d$ of .8 is considered large.

19 $t(1665) = -35.35, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.23$.


21 $F(8, 784) = 458.43, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37$.

22 $t(905) = 48.36, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 2.27$. 

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23 Nine countries scale $\alpha = .77; M = 2.46, SD = .49$; small difference of -.04 from the scale midpoint, $t(784) = -2.38, p = .02$, Cohen's $d = -.12$.

24 See, for example, Gries, *The Politics of American Foreign Policy*.

25 $p = .87$ and $p = .97$ for the United States and Russia, respectively.

26 $\beta = .30$ and $.44$, respectively. Both $p's < .001$.


30 $R^2 = .037, F(13, 896) = 2.67, p = .001$.

31 $\beta = -.09, t = -2.50, p = .01$.

32 $\beta = -.11, t = -2.73, p < .01$, and $\beta = -.09, t = -2.37, p < .05$, respectively.

33 $\beta = .08, t = 1.88, p = .06$.

34 All $p's > .51$.

35 Model $p = .34$.

36 $\beta = -.21, t = -2.61, p = .01$. Scale $\alpha = .77$.

37 The modal response for all five items was a full 4 out of a possible 4, and the skewness statistic approached the conventional cutoff of absolute one at -.89, $SD = .06$.


45 The internal reliabilities of the two scales were very good: $\alpha = .87$ and .83, respectively.

46 $\beta = -.10, p = .01, \Delta R^2 = .007, F = 6.58$.

47 $\beta = .02, p = .05$.

48 $\beta = -.01, p = .04$.

49 Both $\beta = .01, p's > .75$; see table 1.

50 $\beta = .07, p = .04, \Delta R^2 = .004, F = 4.18$.

51 $\beta = .11, p < .01$.

52 $R^2 = .022, F(11, 1266) = 2.55, p = .003$.

53 $\beta = .07, p = .04$, and $\beta = .14, p < .001$, respectively.

54 $\beta = -.07, p = .04$.

55 $\beta = -.07, p = .03, \Delta R^2 = .004, F = 4.52$.


57 In psychology, reactance refers to psychological resistance to choices being removed, leading to choosing precisely the behavior or belief that is being removed by others. See Matthew T. Crawford, Allen R. McConnell, Amy C. Lewis, and Steven J. Sherman, “Reactance, Compliance, and Anticipated Regret,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38, no. 1 (January 2002): 56–63.


60 Triandis, *Individualism & Collectivism*. 

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