

## **How Do Americans View the Rising China?**

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Conventional wisdom holds that the American public is primarily concerned about domestic issues rather than international affairs. Nevertheless, recent research in political psychology and public opinion have effectively documented that the American people often do have considerable interest in international affairs, and can apply their cognitive capabilities in establishing coherent views on foreign policies. Scholars have also shown how public opinion on international affairs has affected the American public's support for the President and helped shape their vote choices.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, American politicians, whether pandering to the public or mobilizing popular support through agenda-setting and framing, have taken advantage of the public's views and concerns about international affairs for campaign and policy purposes.

Given that China has the world's second largest economy and is the second largest trade partner of the US, and the largest foreign holder of American debt, it is therefore not surprising that the "China issue" has been frequently raised in American politics and widely covered in American mass media. For instance, both Obama and Romney actively played the China card in their 2012 presidential campaigns, although with varying emphasis. In addition to China's insufficient protection of human rights (e.g., its one-child policy and the issue of

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, J. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan and Eugene Borgida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz Before A Blind Audience?'" , *American Political Science Review*, 83(1), (1989), pp. 123-41; John H. Aldrich, Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, Jason Reifler and Kristin Thompson Sharp, "Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, (2006), pp. 477-502; John E. Mueller, "Presidential Popularity from Truman and Johnson", *American Political Science Review*, 64(1), (1970), pp. 18-34; James N. Schubert, Patrick A. Stewart and Margaret A. Curran, "A Defining Presidential Moment: 9/11 and the Rally Effect", *Political Psychology*, 23(3), (2002), pp. 559-83.

Falun Gong), discrimination against minorities (e.g., the Tibetans and Uighurs), and lack of democracy, Romney also vehemently criticized China as a currency manipulator and theft of intellectual property. For his part, Obama focused on his administration's confrontation with China on trade and tariff issues and proposed a "pivot" in American security policy from Europe and the Mideast to the Pacific. As Trey Hardin, a Republican political strategist, argued, the China card played by Obama and Romney brought about the most influential emotion motivating voters in the fall of 2012 – fear. Hardin emphasized that: "It is not clear that most voters truly understand the economic significance of China but playing the fear card does not necessarily require that tutorial by either campaign."<sup>2</sup>

China, on the other hand, has long been aware of the significance of how other countries – not just its neighbors but also global powers like the US – view its continuous growth, including its expanding military power, with respect to its foreign policies and future development. Since the early 2000s, China has been working industriously to present its economic growth as a peaceful rise that should enhance world stability and development, rather than threatening other countries' security, in general, or challenging American hegemony, in particular.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, many countries still are anxious about or even suspicious of an increasingly powerful China with its authoritarian government and opaque

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-57518776-503544.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57518776-503544.html)

<sup>3</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/business/2012-12/05/c\\_132019684.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/business/2012-12/05/c_132019684.htm). For related academic and policy analysis, see, among others, Bijian Zheng, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status", *Foreign Affairs*, 84(5), (2005), pp. 18-24.

decision-making processes. Such anxiety and suspicion have generated waves of various China-threat theories around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Seeking to counteract such speculation, the Chinese government has updated its strategies to improve its image around the world. More specifically, it had moved past the conventional diplomatic and academic channels, to direct attention to cultivating its soft power via promoting public diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> Given the significance of Sino-US relations, it is understandable that the Chinese government has invested millions of dollars to improve its image in the US. For instance, sixty-eight Confucius Institutes have been established in the US, accounting for more than 20 percent of all such programs sponsored by the Chinese government around the world. In early 2011, China's promotional advertisement debuted in Times Square. And later, a number of promotional advertisements, sponsored by Chinese cities like Chengdu, Suzhou, and Shanghai, were shown in the US.

Given the influence of public opinion on American foreign policies, the salience of the China issue for American politicians, and the Chinese government's concerted efforts in the U.S. in promoting an image of its peaceful rise, it is undeniably important to examine how the American public views China and responds to its rise. Is it true that most American voters

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<sup>4</sup> See, among others, John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise", *Current History*, 105(690), (2006), pp. 160-6; Amitai Etzioni, "Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?", *International Affairs*, 87(3), (2011), pp. 539-5; Elizabeth C. Economy, "The Game Changer: Coping with China's Foreign Policy Revolution", *Foreign Affairs*, 89(6), (2010), pp. 142-5; Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Andrew Small, "China's New Dictatorship Diplomacy: Is Beijing Parting with Pariahs?", *Foreign Affairs*, 87(1), (2008), pp. 38-56.

<sup>5</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-09/01/c\\_12505564.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-09/01/c_12505564.htm).

do not truly understand the significance of China as a rising and rivalrous power of the US? Do they effectively perceive the rise of China? What are their views of the socioeconomic, political, cultural performance of China, as well as China's influence and behavior in the international community? What is their general feeling toward China and its development? How is the general feeling shaped by their assessments of China's socioeconomic, political and cultural performance? Does their exposure to China-related information in American media affect this general feeling? Will more life experiences of China, e.g., via visiting China, affect their general feeling?

In this paper, we use an original national survey of Americans, conducted in the summer of 2010, to address these questions. More specifically, we assess 1) how well Americans understand the significance of China and its rise; 2) their perceptions of China's socioeconomic, political and cultural aspects; 3) their general feeling toward China, compared to some other prominent foreign countries; and 4) how this general feeling might have been shaped by their perceptions of China's socioeconomic, political and cultural aspects, as well as their exposure to China-related information from various sources and their partisan-ideological predispositions. The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, moving beyond the conventional thermometer measures, we enrich existing research by more comprehensively examining the American people's views of China, which are multi-dimensional and contain embedded tensions. Secondly, we explore the relative salience

of the American public's evaluations of China's various aspects in shaping their general feeling toward China. Thirdly, we adopt new instruments to measure Americans' exposure to China-related information, including different media channels and personal contacts with China; and we examine how such information affects the American public's general dispositions toward China.

This paper is organized as follows. In the first section, we review existing literature and present some of the unique features of our 2010 American national survey. We show how these features can enrich our current understanding of how the American public views China and associated dynamics. Next section focuses on how Americans understand the significance of China and recognize its rising. After examining the American public's multidimensional views of China, and their embedded tensions, we scrutinize the relative salience of such views in shaping Americans' general feeling toward China, as well as the influence of their exposure to China-related information from a variety of sources. The last section concludes and provides some suggestions for future related research.

### **Survey Data and Original Features**

In 2010, the Institute of Arts and Humanities at Shanghai Jiao-tong University collaborated with the China Center (now the Program for Research on China) at Duke University and conducted the Americans' Attitudes toward China Survey (AACS). This is one of a few nationally representative sampling surveys initiated by a Chinese academic institute

in the US. Several Chinese and American political scientists, communication scholars, and public opinion experts were involved in the questionnaire design.<sup>6</sup> The AACS was administered by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Indiana University, with interviews conducted between June 23, 2010 and August 29, 2010. The survey was conducted with an RDD sample of landline phone numbers in the lower forty eight states.<sup>7</sup> For each residential telephone number, one respondent was randomly selected from all eligible household members (18+). The average interview length is 24.2 minutes.<sup>8</sup> The final sample includes 810 cases.<sup>9</sup> Given the salience of China issues in American politics, especially during electoral campaigns, there is no lack of empirical work on how Americans view China using survey data.<sup>10</sup> Our survey differs in several respects.

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<sup>6</sup> Prof. Kang Liu of Shanghai Jiao-tong University and Prof. Tianjian Shi and Prof. John Aldrich of Duke University collectively chaired a team for questionnaire design.

<sup>7</sup> Telephone numbers were randomly generated using the Genesys list-assisted method. This method allows for unpublished numbers and new listings to be included in the sample. After selecting a random sample of telephone numbers, the numbers were matched to a database of business and non-working numbers. All matches were subsequently purged from the original sample. All cases confirmed to be eligible were called up to 24 times, except in cases of respondent refusal or insufficient time before the end of the study. Cases with unknown eligibility (persistent no answers or answering devices unknown to belong to residences) were called a minimum of 8 times, with calls made during the morning, afternoon, evening, and weekend. Interviewers attempted to convert each refusal at least twice, once at the first instance of refusal and again a few days later.

<sup>8</sup> Data were collected by telephone using the CASES software (5.4) on-site at the CSR telephone interviewing facilities.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed information on the demographic features of the AACS sample is attached to the appendix.

<sup>10</sup> See, among others, Tao Xie and Benjamin I. Page, "Americans and the Rise of China as a World Power", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(65), (2010), pp. 479-50; Peter Hays Gries, H. Michael Crowson and Todd L. Sandel, "The Olympic Effect on American Attitudes towards China: Beyond Personality, Ideology, and Media Exposure", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(64), (2010), pp. 213-3; Benjamin I. Page and Tao Xie, *Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010; Charles Tien and James A. Nathan, "Trends: American Ambivalence toward China", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 65(1), (2001), pp. 124-38. There is another line of research that focuses on longitudinal changes in the aggregated views of China in the US. See, Xiuli Wang and Pamela J. Shoemaker, "What Shapes Americans' opinion of

First, it is one of the few cases that seek to measure systematically, rather than simply assume the significance of the rising of China to the American public.<sup>11</sup> Without such an empirical basis, it is no wonder that even during the 2012 presidential campaigns, some political strategists still publicly suggested that most American voters might not truly understand the significance of China; and that their response to the playing of the China card by both presidential candidates could be primarily emotional.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, the extent to which the American public clearly and effectively understands the significance of China and its rising lies at the heart of all existing relevant debates. Whether ignorance, emotions, or ideologically-colored interpretations of reality constitute the foundation of the American people's views of China has serious implications for the future of Sino-US relations, to say nothing of China's public diplomacy. To assess such opinions, the AACS asked questions regarding Americans' knowledge about and evaluations of certain aspects of Sino-US relations and China's role in the world. As previously argued, this provides the indispensable cognitive foundation for further analyses on how Americans respond to the rising of China.

Secondly, most public opinion surveys use one or two general measures such as the 100-point feeling thermometer, favorable-unfavorable choice, or ally-enemy recognition

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China? Country Characteristics, Public Relations and Mass Media", *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 4(1), (2011), pp. 1-20. Due to the possible issue of ecological fallacy, the research focusing on aggregated views of China in the US cannot provide reliable information on how the American people's views of China may change for various reasons.

<sup>11</sup> The exceptions are: Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China*; Xie and Page, "Americans and the Rise of China as a World Power".

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-57518776-503544.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57518776-503544.html)



measures to tap China's image in the US; and most of them focus on the foreign policy dimension. Nevertheless, while they are indeed valuable for some purposes, these measures cannot effectively capture the multidimensional nature of China and its rise. Neither can they provide sufficient information to examine how the multidimensional nature of China and its rise might have generated some tensions in the American people's related views. As Tien and Nathan document in their analysis of waves of American public opinion surveys in the 1990s, Americans actually are quite ambivalent toward China, particularly when we move away from the general measures and foreign policies.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, existing research is primarily concerned with how the American people think their governments should deal with the rising China, rather than the American public's perceptions and evaluations of China's behavior and performance. To address these deficiencies, the AACCS, in addition to general thermometer measures, developed a variety of questions to tap how Americans assess China on various aspects, like its economy, political system, culture, and international behavior. These new measures provide a richer information basis for more nuanced understandings on how China's performance and its behavior are perceived by the American people. These data also make it possible to understand the relative salience of such perceptions (regarding various aspects of China) in shaping the American public's general dispositions toward China that have been widely documented in related public opinion surveys.

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<sup>13</sup> Tien and Nathan, "Trends: American Ambivalence toward China".

Thirdly, according to contemporary research on public opinion, predispositions and information are the two factors that shape public opinion.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we need to know where Americans get their information about China and to measure relevant predispositions to understand the origins of China's image in the US in a more comprehensive manner. In most existing research, predispositions are usually captured by a conservative-liberal scale or self-reported party affiliation.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the sources of China-related information are either completely ignored or roughly approximated by some general media exposure measures. For instance, in Page and Xie's most recent and comprehensive assessment of China's image in the US, how Americans get their information about China is neither in their analytical framework nor in their empirical models.<sup>16</sup> In Gries et al.'s examination on how the 2008 Beijing Olympics affected the American public's views of China, they only use one general measure asking whether their respondents accessed any coverage about China through American media during the two weeks of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.<sup>17</sup> While we accept the validity of the conventional predisposition measures, we believe it is crucial to give serious and sufficient attention to the range of the American public's sources of

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<sup>14</sup> See, among others, R. Michael Alvarez and John Brehm, *Hard Choices, Easy Answers: Values, Information, and American Public Opinion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Personality measures and right-wing authoritarianism are also used to capture relevant predispositions. See Gries, Crowson and Sandel, "The Olympic Effect on American Attitudes towards China: Beyond Personality, Ideology, and Media Exposure".

<sup>16</sup> Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China*.

<sup>17</sup> Gries, Crowson and Sandel, "The Olympic Effect on American Attitudes towards China: Beyond Personality, Ideology, and Media Exposure".

China-related information and their possible effects on Americans' views of China. Therefore, besides general media exposure measures, the AACS included specific indicators measuring whether Americans access any information about China from various media channels (i.e., newspapers, radio stations, TV programs, and news websites). Moreover, we believe that some Americans' life experiences in China (visiting for vacation or business) should provide some critical information that might be essentially different from what they acquire from American media. Thus, the AACS adopted a question specifically asking for the American people's previous experience of visiting China.

### **Do Americans Recognize the Significance of China and Its Rising?**

As discussed previously, before we examine how Americans view China, it is very important to be clear on whether Americans actually do recognize the significance of China and its rising. Or, perhaps, the American public's attitudes toward China are simply led by emotions or illusions mobilized by strategic politicians. This exercise provides the critical cognitive foundation for our later examination of China's image in the US.

The AACS included two questions focusing on the economic significance of China to the US: 1) "To the best of your knowledge, do you think the US loans more money to China or that China loans more money to the US?" And 2) "Whose economy do you think would be harmed more if the US completely broke off trade relations with China?" To measure whether the American public does recognize the rising of China, the AACS asked two questions

focusing on the influence of China in the world: 1) “On a 5 point scale, where 1 means not at all and 5 means extremely well, how well do you think the following statement describes China? China has been influential in world politics.” And 2) “Thinking about the next ten years, do you think that China’s influence in the world will increase, decrease, or stay about the same?” The respondents’ answers are presented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1A to 1D about here]

As illustrated in Figure 1A, over 70 percent of the American people recognize that China lends more money to the US, which is compatible with the fact that China is the largest foreign owner of American debt.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, as shown in Figure 1B, nearly 60 percent of Americans believe that the American economy might be harmed more than China’s if trade relations are disrupted. Thus, a large majority of the American people do truly understand the significance of China for the US, at least in terms of the economy. In addition, most Americans also clearly perceive the growing influence of China, as displayed in Figure 1C and 1D. More than 60 percent of the American people agree that China has been influential in world politics, and greater than three-quarters believe that China’s influence in the world will increase in ten years.

Contrary to some American politicians’ beliefs, most Americans not only truly

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<sup>18</sup> Our finding is also compatible with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ 2010 public opinion survey on American attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy: Two-thirds of Americans understood that China loaned more money to the United States than the United States loaned to China. This confirms the validity of our survey.

[http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/About\\_Us/Press\\_Releases/FY11\\_Releases/110118.aspx](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/About_Us/Press_Releases/FY11_Releases/110118.aspx)

understand the significance of China for the US, but also clearly perceive the rising of China with significant and increasing influence in the world. In other words, the American public is not ignorant of the economic significance of China and its rising influence in the world.<sup>19</sup> Such findings should not be too surprising, given the close Sino-US economic connections and American media's extensive coverage on related issues. Will this lack of ignorance also be found when it comes to China's other aspects?

### **Americans' Multidimensional Views of the Rising China**

Most existing studies on China's image in the US focus on the American people's general feeling toward China, the implications of a rising China to the US, or their views about what should be the appropriate foreign policies toward China from the American government. Few explore how Americans view China regarding its performance in other domains. As China increasingly places emphasis on cultivating its soft power and promoting public diplomacy in the world to improve its image and secure a friendlier international environment, it is critical to understand how Americans assess China on various aspects other than the Sino-US relations, e.g., Is China's political system functional? Is Chinese popular culture attractive?

To do so, the AACCS administered a new battery of survey questions designed to gauge how the American public views China's economic performance, political system, cultural

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<sup>19</sup> This confirms Page and Xie's findings using American public opinion surveys in the early 2000s. See, Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China*.

attractiveness, and international behavior. All respondents were asked: “On a 5 point scale, where 1 means not at all and 5 means extremely well, how well do you think each of the following statements describes China?” 1) “China has an internationally competitive economy”; 2) “China has a political system that serves the needs of its people”; 3) “China has an appealing popular culture”; 4) “China has a rich cultural heritage”; 5) “China has been influential in world politics”; and 6) “China has been dodging responsibility in the world.” In addition, all respondents were also asked to provide their prospective evaluations of China’s influence in the world and democracy in ten years: 7) “Thinking about the next ten years, do you think that China’s influence in the world will increase, decrease, or stay about the same?” and 8) “Thinking about the next ten years, do you think that China will become more democratic and responsive to its people, less democratic and responsive to its people, or stay about the same?” The respondents’ answers to the eight questions are presented in Figure 2.

[Figure 2A-2H]

As illustrated in Figure 2A and 2B, greater than 64 percent of the American people recognize the international competitiveness of the Chinese economy; and, around 55 percent of the American public also believes that China’s political system is effective in serving its people’s needs. It seems that, although China has been vehemently criticized in America for its practice of unfair trade, inferior product quality, merciless political oppression, and lack of respect for basic human rights, Americans are not blind to what the Chinese government has

achieved over the past decades in enhancing the competitiveness of its economy and improving the living standard and welfare of the Chinese people.

The American public's assessment of Chinese culture, however, is much less positive than what the Chinese government has hoped for. As shown in Figure 2C and 2D, over 70 percent of the American people do not think China's popular culture is appealing; and only a little more than 40 percent recognize the rich cultural heritage of China. These data were collected only two years after the highly popular Beijing Olympics; and they speak to certain aspects that have always been a major selling point for China's public diplomacy.<sup>20</sup>

Americans also hold quite nuanced views of China's international behavior and influence, as shown in Figure 2E and 2F. Close to 61 percent of the American people regard China as a world power with significant influence. Meanwhile, nevertheless, a little more than 67 percent also believe that China has been dodging its international responsibility. Of course, the data do not allow us to examine which policies adopted by China in the world might have driven this perception of China dodging its international responsibility, whether about global climate change, the Korean Peninsula, or civil wars in Africa and the Middle East. These findings, nonetheless, clearly contradict what the Chinese government tries to present to its audience in the world – China is a growing and responsible power in the international community.

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<sup>20</sup> To what extent the Confucius Institutes established in the U.S. may contribute to a better recognition of China's rich cultural heritage is an interesting question that merits further research,

The American public's prospective evaluations of China are also conditional upon the aspects under examination. As shown in Figure 2G, a little more than 77 percent of Americans expect China's influence in the world to increase in ten years. Comparatively speaking, their views of the prospects of democracy in China are much less encouraging, as illustrated in Figure 2H. Although around 28 percent of the American people expect some democratic progress in China in ten years, close to 60 percent of them do not anticipate any democratic change in this largest authoritarian society in the foreseeable future.

Compatible with our findings on the American people's recognition of the significance of China and its rising, Americans are not ignorant of China's performance on other aspects either. Moreover, the American public's views of China are multidimensional with embedded tensions, that is, a mix of positive and negative evaluations. On the one hand, they effectively recognize China's superior performance in building its economy, effectiveness in serving its people's needs, and success in enhancing its influence in the world. On the other hand, they are not particularly attracted to in China's popular culture, do not sufficiently recognize China's rich cultural heritage, denounce its dodging necessary international responsibility, and are not impressed by the prospects of democracy in China. Some interesting questions then arise: How do the American people's multidimensional views of China (with embedded tensions) shape their general dispositions toward Chin? What is the varying influence of these multidimensional views and prospective evaluations in shaping the American public's general



feeling toward China?

### **General Feeling and Varying Assessments**

To gauge the American public's general feeling toward China, the AACS adopted the most widely used feeling thermometer (i.e., a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 100), as compared to three other foreign countries that most Americans are familiar with, i.e., Japan (America's long-term ally in Asia), Russia (America's long-term rivalry in Europe), and India (China's potential competitor in Asia). To minimize any effect the order of presentation of the four countries might have, the four were rotated randomly across respondents.<sup>21</sup> The American people's general feelings toward the four countries are presented in Figure 4.

[Figure 3 about here]

On average, as illustrated in Figure 3, the American people's general feeling toward China falls on the cool-side of the feeling thermometer (47.97/100) and is ranked the lowest among the four countries.<sup>22</sup> It is understandable that Americans hold a much warmer feeling toward Japan (66.57/100) – which has been a liberal democracy and a long-term ally of the US. It is a little bit surprising to see that their feeling toward China is significantly lower than

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<sup>21</sup> Statistical analysis shows that the question order does not affect the ratings significantly. Related results are available upon request from the authors.

<sup>22</sup> This finding is compatible with the Chicago Council's 2010 Survey. According to the Chicago Council's survey, American people's general feeling toward China was 45 on the feeling thermometer, and colder than their feelings toward Russia, India, and Japan. Again, this confirms the validity of our survey. Pew's 2010 survey shows the 49% of Americans held favorable views of China in 2010. As we collapse the 100-point scale into a dichotomous measure (i.e., 50+ indicating a favorable view), around 41% of our respondents held favorable views of China. This is close to Pew's result (considering the distinct measures used here and varying interpretations of "favorable views" among Pew's respondents).

that toward Russia (50.20/100),<sup>23</sup> despite the generation-long Cold War, as well as continuing tensions and even disagreements between Russia and the U.S. in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

As the previous section shows, the American people hold multi-dimensional views of China, with a mix of positive and negative evaluations of China's performance in various aspects. Furthermore, as Zaller demonstrates, most respondents sample the information that is accessible to them when giving responses to survey questions.<sup>24</sup> When the American people are approached for their general attitudes toward China, how do they sample their multi-dimensional and mixed views of China to report their general feeling? To explore the respective influence of the varying assessments, we cross-tabulate Americans' general dispositions toward China against their evaluations of China on the aforementioned aspects; and present the results in Figure 4.

[Figure 4A-4H about here]

Overall, the American public's general feeling toward China does respond to their assessments of China's various aspects in different ways. Comparatively speaking, Americans are inclined to hold warmer attitudes toward China when they are impressed by China's internationally competitive economy (Figure 4A), popular culture (Figure 4C), influence in

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<sup>23</sup> The difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

<sup>24</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

world politics (Figure 4E), and prospects of democracy in ten years (Figure 4G).

Though a large number of the American people are impressed by the Chinese political system's effectiveness in serving its people's needs (Figure 4B) and anticipate China's increasing influence in the world (Figure 4H), such positive perceptions do not dramatically boost their general feeling toward China. It is a little surprising to find that, instead of improving Americans' general attitudes toward China, a clear recognition of China's rich cultural heritage (Figure 4D) and disbelief in China's dodging its international responsibility actually drive their attitudes toward China even colder, although by a small margin. Of course, the significance and robustness of such findings demand more rigorous statistical examination that we will do in later sections.

### **Exposure to China-Related Information and Partisan-Ideological Predispositions**

It is widely acknowledged that American media play a key role in shaping its public opinion, even though the American public has considerable autonomy in selecting whatever information sources they prefer. American media, via priming and framing, can effectively shape how Americans sample accessible information when giving responses to survey questions.<sup>25</sup> That is why a significant number of studies on China's image in the US focus on

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<sup>25</sup> See, among others, Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Election* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jonathan McDonald Ladd and Gabriel S. Lenz, "Exploiting a Rare Communication Shift to Document the Persuasive Power of the News Media", *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(2), (2009), pp. 394-41; Susanna Dilliplane, Seth K. Goldman and Diana C. Mutz, "Televised Exposure to Politics: New Measures for a Fragmented Media Environment", *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(1), (2013), pp. 236-48.

how China is covered in American media.<sup>26</sup> Despite the well documented dominance of negative coverage on China in American media, there are mixed findings on how media exposure affects Americans' views of China at the individual level.<sup>27</sup>

The AACS adopted some new survey instruments to address some of the measurement issues regarding media exposure in existing relevant research. First, instead of using the American people's general media exposure (which is likely to be overwhelmed by domestic news), we measure their interest in and exposure to China-specific information in the mass media specifically. Second, rather than treating all media channels alike,<sup>28</sup> our measures of media use differentiate among a variety of media channels (e.g., newspapers, TV programs, radio stations, and the Internet).<sup>29</sup> Third, we further examine ways in which the American people might have had direct contacts with China such as through trips to China. Such contacts are likely to provide more vivid and meaningful information about China. And the information obtained in such ways might also be essentially different from what American media deliver.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Liss, "Images of China in the American Print Media: A Survey from 2000 to 2002", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 12(35), (2003), pp. 299-31; Wang and Shoemaker, "What Shapes Americans' opinion of China? Country Characteristics, Public Relations and Mass Media"; Gerald C. Stone and Zhiwen Xiao, "Anointing a New Enemy: The Rise of Anti-China Coverage after the USSR's Demise", *International Communication Gazette*, 69(1), (2007), pp. 91-108

<sup>27</sup> Gries, Crowson and Sandel, "The Olympic Effect on American Attitudes towards China: Beyond Personality, Ideology, and Media Exposure".

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> It is unfortunate that most studies on China's image in the US focus on newspapers, with limited information on how China is covered in American cable networks, radio stations, and news websites. Easy access to relevant data and convenience in doing content analysis may explain this bias favoring newspapers.

More specifically, the AACS asked a question about the respondents' general interest in news about China ("How interested are you in news about China?"), their trips to China ("Have you ever visited mainland China?"), and whether they accessed any news about China through various media channels in the week before the survey ("In the past week, (a) did you read any news about China in newspapers, including online versions? (b) Did you hear any news about China on radio stations? (c) Did you watch any news about China on TV news broadcast? (d) Did you read any news about China on Internet news websites?"). We believe these refined and China-specific measures can more effectively capture how the American people acquire China-related information, which, in turn, should facilitate our subsequent analyses on the respective influence of different sources of such information on Americans' views of the rising China. The respondents' answers are summarized in Figure 5.

[Figure 5A-5F about here]

Generally speaking, as shown in Figure 5A, the American public shows significant interest in news about China: about 18 percent are highly interested; and a little more than 59 percent are somewhat interested. Moreover, despite the high costs of transpacific journeys, as illustrated in Figure 5B, still about 8 percent of the American people have visited mainland China. The American people's interest in China is also reflected in their consumption of China-specific news from various media channels. In the week before the survey, around 25 percent of the American people reported reading news about China from newspapers (Figure

4C) or watching such news on TV news broadcasts (Figure 4E). Meanwhile, about 15 percent claimed to have listened to China-specific news from radio stations (Figure 4D) or read such news from news websites (Figure 4F). In summary, the majority of Americans are interested in learning about China, and a significant number of them acquire China-related news from various media channels (more likely from newspapers or TV news broadcasts). Though personal contacts with China are still limited among Americans, a noticeable number of them have visited China.

How does such China-related information from various sources affect the American public's general feeling toward China? For exploratory purpose, we cross-tabulate the American people's general feeling toward China against their interests in and acquisition of China-related information from various media channels; and present the results in Figure 6.

[Figure 6A-6F about here]

As expected, China-related information from different sources shape the American public's general feeling toward China in distinct ways. Comparatively speaking, the most salient influence lies in the American people's life experience in China (Figure 6B), which is associated with a much warmer attitude toward China. And China-related information from different media channels also shifts the American public's general dispositions toward China in distinct ways. Accessing such information via newspapers (Figure 6C) and Internet news websites (Figure 6F) is associated with more positive general feeling toward China; while,

acquisition of such information from TV news broadcasts (Figure 6E) and radio stations (Figure 6D) is associated with more negative general feeling toward China. Again, we will check the significance and robustness of these associations with more rigorous regression analyses in later sections.

Besides accessed information, predispositions also matter for American public opinion; and most research focuses on individual-level partisan-ideological predispositions. The AACS employed two conventional measures to capture the American people's political ideology (i.e., the conservative-moderate-liberal trichotomous scale) and partisan affiliation (i.e., the Republican-Independent-Democrat trichotomous scale). Again, we cross-tabulate the American public's general feeling toward China against their partisan-ideological predispositions to explore their respective influence, and present the results in Figure 7.

[Figure 7A-7B about here]

Compatible with existing research's conclusions on the influence of partisan-ideological predispositions, American Democrats, shown in Figure 7A, hold warmer general dispositions toward China than Republicans and Independents. Meanwhile, American liberals, as illustrated in Figure 7B, also hold more favorable general attitudes toward China; and their conservative counterparts hold the least favorable general feeling.

### **Multivariate Models and Respective Influence of Various Factors**

In previous sections, we use the sample technique of cross-tabulation to explore the

possible influence of the American people's assessments of China's performance in various aspects, their exposure to China-related information from distinct sources, and their partisan-ideological predispositions on their general feeling toward China. To effectively evaluate the significance and robustness of the aforementioned findings, we rely on multivariate regression models to control for respondents' demographic features and establish the respective and independent influence of these factors. Given the continuous nature of the dependent variable (i.e., Americans' general feeling toward China as measured by the 100-point feeling thermometer), OLS regressions can be appropriately used. The results of regression models with different specifications are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

As displayed in Table 1, our first model (M1) provides a baseline model for understanding the American public's general feeling toward China, accounting for its possible stratification along age, gender, educational attainment, and income level. In the second model (M2), we add the American people's assessments of China's performance in various aspects (including their prospective evaluations of China's influence in the world and democracy). In the third (M3) and fourth (M4) models, we further include American people's acquisition of China-related information from distinct channels, as well as their partisan-ideological predispositions.

As we move from M1 to M2, the associated R-squared (i.e., the percentage of variance



in Americans' feeling toward China that has been accounted for by the specified model) is significantly improved, increasing from 3.90% to 20.28%. Though adding information access and predispositions (M3 and M4) further increases the R-squared, the magnitude of change is much smaller. This clearly suggests the close relationships between the American people's assessments of China's performance in various aspects and their general feeling toward China. In other words, Americans do sample their multidimensional views of China (with embedded tensions) to form their general dispositions toward China

More specifically, as shown in M2, the American people's recognition of the international competitiveness of China's economy and the attractiveness of its popular culture, as well as their more optimistic views of the prospects of democracy in China, have statistically and substantively significant positive influence over their general feeling toward China. Surprisingly and contradicting the conventional expectation, Americans' recognition of China's rich cultural tradition actually significantly lowers their general attitudes toward China. Statistically speaking, the American people's views of the effectiveness of China's political system, China's current and future influence in the world, as well as China's behavior in the international community, have little influence over their general feeling toward China. Furthermore, since the same scales (i.e., 3-point ordinal scales) are used for the varying assessments, we can directly compare respective coefficients to assess such assessments' respective influence on the American people's general dispositions toward

China. Generally, the influence of the American people's evaluations of China's popular culture and prospects of democracy dwarfs that of their assessments of China's cultural heritage and economic performance.

Including the American public's exposure to China-related information from various source and their partisan-ideological predispositions (M3 and M4) does not change the aforementioned findings. Nevertheless, M3 and M4 reveal some interesting patterns regarding the influence of media use. Basically, the news that Americans acquire from various sources about China has significantly varying effects on their general feeling toward China.

Above all, life experiences in China significantly and dramatically improve Americans' general attitudes toward China by around 10 points on the 100-point scale. And the second-hand information about China acquired via different American media channels has much less significant but still noticeable influence on how they view China generally; and the impact varies across the media channels. On the one hand, the influence of China-related news that Americans read from newspapers or news websites cannot be statistically differentiated from zero, despite their positive sign. On the other hand, the China-specific news that Americans watch on TV news broadcasts or hear on radio stations significantly shifts Americans' general feeling of the rising China in a negative direction. It is noteworthy that the influence of the American people's life experiences in China (i.e., unfiltered

first-hand information) dwarfs the media effects (i.e., filtered second-hand information).

Partisan-ideological predispositions also matter existing research suggests: compared to American moderates, as shown in M4, the liberals hold significantly more positive general feeling toward China and the conservatives are significantly much colder. Meanwhile, American Democrats, as shown in M5, hold much warmer feeling toward China than Independents (whose general dispositions toward China are not statistically different from those of Republicans).

In summary, the American people sample their multi-dimensional views of China – a mix of both positive and negative evaluations – when approached for their general feeling toward China. And they (though subconsciously in most cases) assign different weights to their assessments of China’s performance in various aspects when forming the general feeling. More specifically, at least according to the AACS data, the American people’s perceptions of China’s economy, popular culture, cultural heritage, and prospects of democracy significantly shape their general feeling toward China. Meanwhile, the American public’s acquisition of China-related information from various sources also significantly shapes their general attitudes toward China; and these effects differ considerably by the type of medium attended to. It is important to emphasize that the American people’s life experiences in China significantly improve their general dispositions toward China; and the influence of such first-hand information dwarfs that of the second-hand information that they acquire from the

American media.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

As the world's second largest economy with increasing military power and international influence, China takes its image in the world seriously to cultivate a supportive international environment for its continuous growth and future development. Since the early 2000s, China has been industriously promoting its image in the world through various channels, increasingly via promoting public diplomacy and cultivating its soft power. Given the hegemonic status of the US and the close economic connections between China and the US, Sino-US relations are of critical importance for both American and Chinese foreign policies. Moreover, thanks to the significant role of public opinion in policy making in America, how the American people view and feel about China has serious implications for Sino-US relations. In this paper, we use an American national survey conducted through the joint efforts of Shanghai Jiao-tong University and Duke University in 2010 to systematically examine how Americans view the rising China.

Different from some American politicians' comments on the American public's general ignorance of the significance of China, our survey shows that the majority of Americans not only effectively understand the economic significance of China for the US, but also clearly recognize China's great influence in world politics and expect China's international influence to grow in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the American public's views of China are

multidimensional and include embedded tensions. China's superior economic performance, the Chinese political system's effectiveness in serving its people's needs, and China's increasing influence in the world are widely recognized among the American people. Nevertheless, they are generally not interested in China's popular culture, do not effectively recognize China's culture heritage, think China has been dodging its international responsibility, and hold relatively pessimistic views on the prospects of democracy in China.

Compatible with existing research on how the American people respond to public opinion surveys, our empirical findings show that the American public does sample their multidimensional views (with embedded tensions) of the rising China when approached for their general feeling toward China. And when these multidimensional views – a mix of both positive and negative evaluations – are translated into their general attitudes, the American public holds, on average, a lukewarm/cool feeling toward China, which is even significantly lower than their general feeling toward America's long-term rival, Russia. Further analyses show that the American people's assessments of China's economic performance, popular culture, cultural heritage, and the prospects of democracy in China have significant influence over their general attitudes toward China. Among these prominent aspects, China's democracy in the future and its popular culture seem to have the most salient influence on the American public's general feeling toward China.

To better understand how the American people's relatively cool feeling toward China is

shaped by different sources of China-related information, we use some new instruments from the AACS. Our data show that a significant number of Americans are not only interested in China-related news, but also effectively acquire such information from various media channels. Despite the significant costs of transpacific journeys, around 8 percent of the American people have visited China, and, thus, acquired some first-hand information about China through their life experiences in China. Furthermore, we find some significant evidence about how such life experiences can dramatically improve the American public's feeling toward China, by as much as 10 points on the 100-point scale. We also find some significant but varying media effects in this regard. Of course, like other researchers, we confirm the significant influence of Americans' partisan-ideological predispositions on coloring their general dispositions toward China.

Our data systematically show that the American public is not ignorant of China and its rising; and their views of China are multidimensional with embedded tensions. Although the American people do recognize China's stunning performance in sustaining an internationally competitive economy and serving its people's needs (primarily socioeconomic ones), in most cases, due to their partisan-ideological predispositions (e.g., the conservatives and Republicans), well-established propensity of emphasizing the intrinsic value of democracy, and socialized appreciation of distinct values, cultural products and traditions, their general feeling toward China is likely to be heavily colored and even dominated, at least in our data,

by their assessments of China's performance in democracy and cultural industry – which in most cases are negative. Moreover, the dominant role played by American media in delivering China-related information to the American people could have further exacerbated the negative influence of such salience issues in shaping their general feeling toward China.

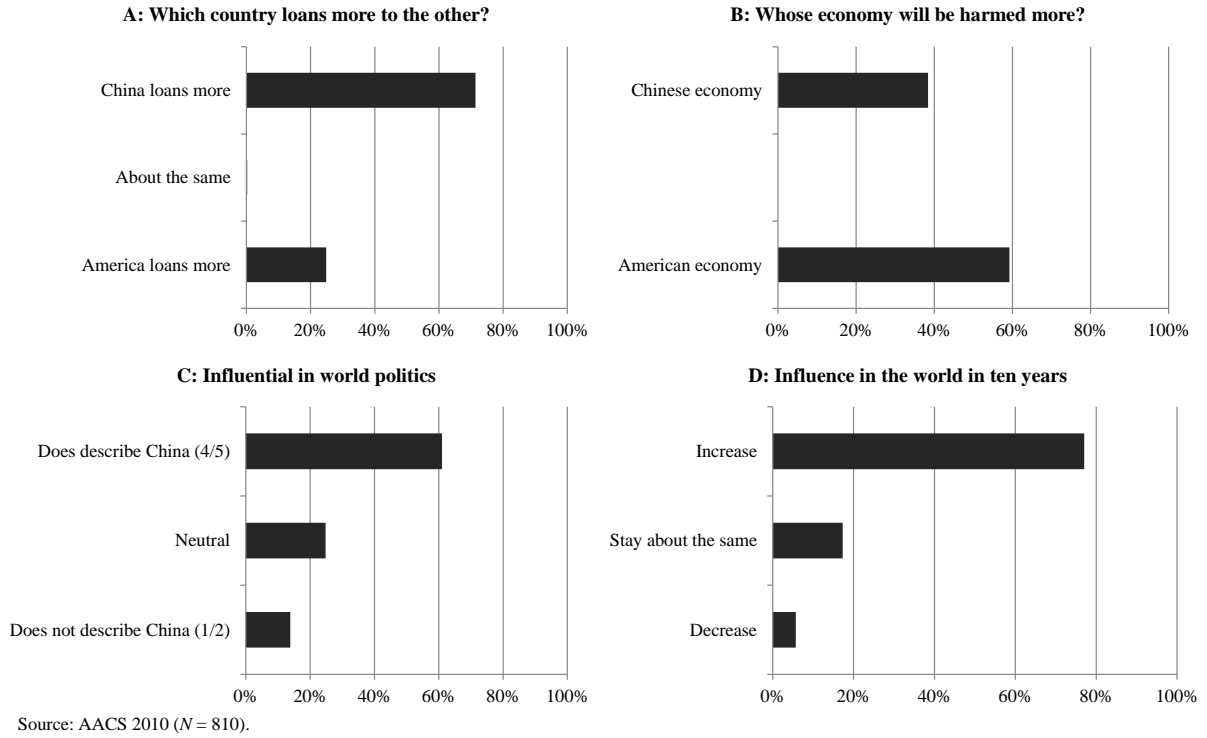
Our findings have some key implications for understanding how American public opinion regarding China might evolve. First, given the significant influence of ideologies, values, and cultural factors in shaping the American people's general attitudes toward China, as well as the Chinese government's strategies in consolidating its domestic rule (barely promoting democratic change in the way that Americans prefer) and promoting its image around the worlds (emphasizing China's cultural traditions and its lack of ambition in challenging the current international order and regime), it is unlikely to observe some significant improvement in the American public's general feeling toward China in the near future.

Second, the salience of ideologies, values, and cultural factors provide sufficient leeway for American politicians to mobilize and shape how the American people's general attitudes toward China. As our data show, the American people clearly recognize the Chinese government's superior economic and political performance. Thus, effectively presenting China as a manipulator of currency for unfair advantage in international trade or a theft of intellectual properties via hacking American companies has to overcome a much higher

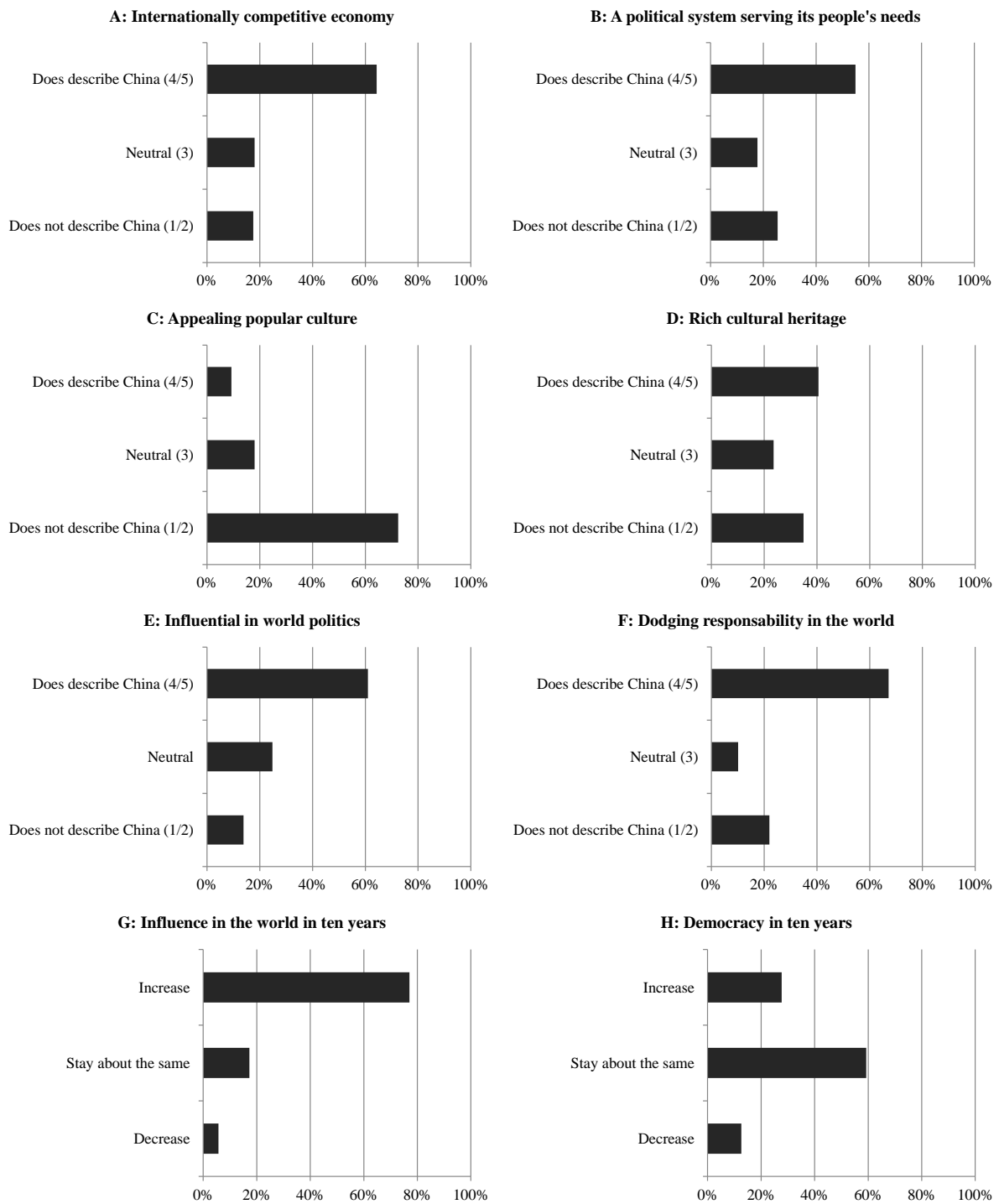
hurdle than framing China as a constant violator of human rights or an authoritarian abuser of violence.

Of course, our data do not allow us to examine how the American public's specific views of and general feeling toward China could have been translated into their policy preferences, candidate evaluations and vote choices, which has more direct implications for American politics and the Sino-US relations. But our findings provide some cognitive foundation for examining the underlying dynamics of China's image in the US. With more appropriate data collected in the future, we can effectively bring the cognitive dynamics and behavior responses together, thus providing a more comprehensive and effective understanding on the role of Americans' views of China in Sino-US relations.



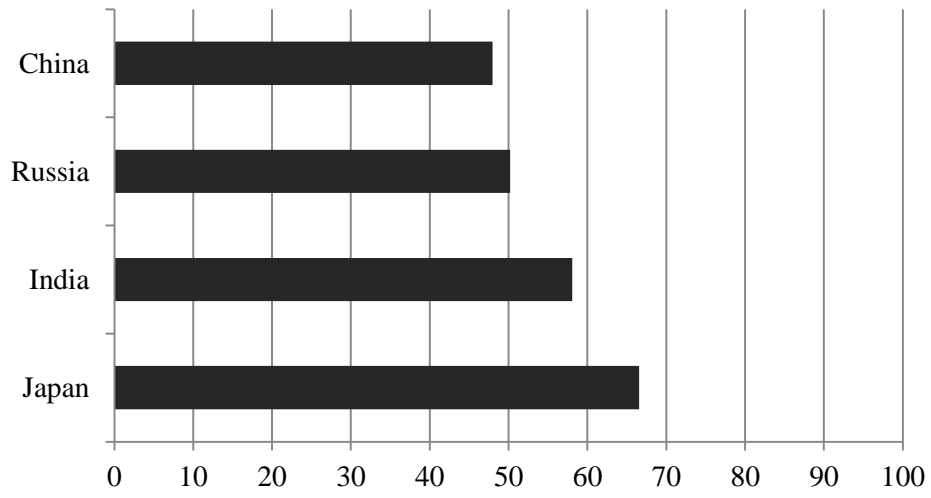


**Figure 1: Significance of China and Its Rising**



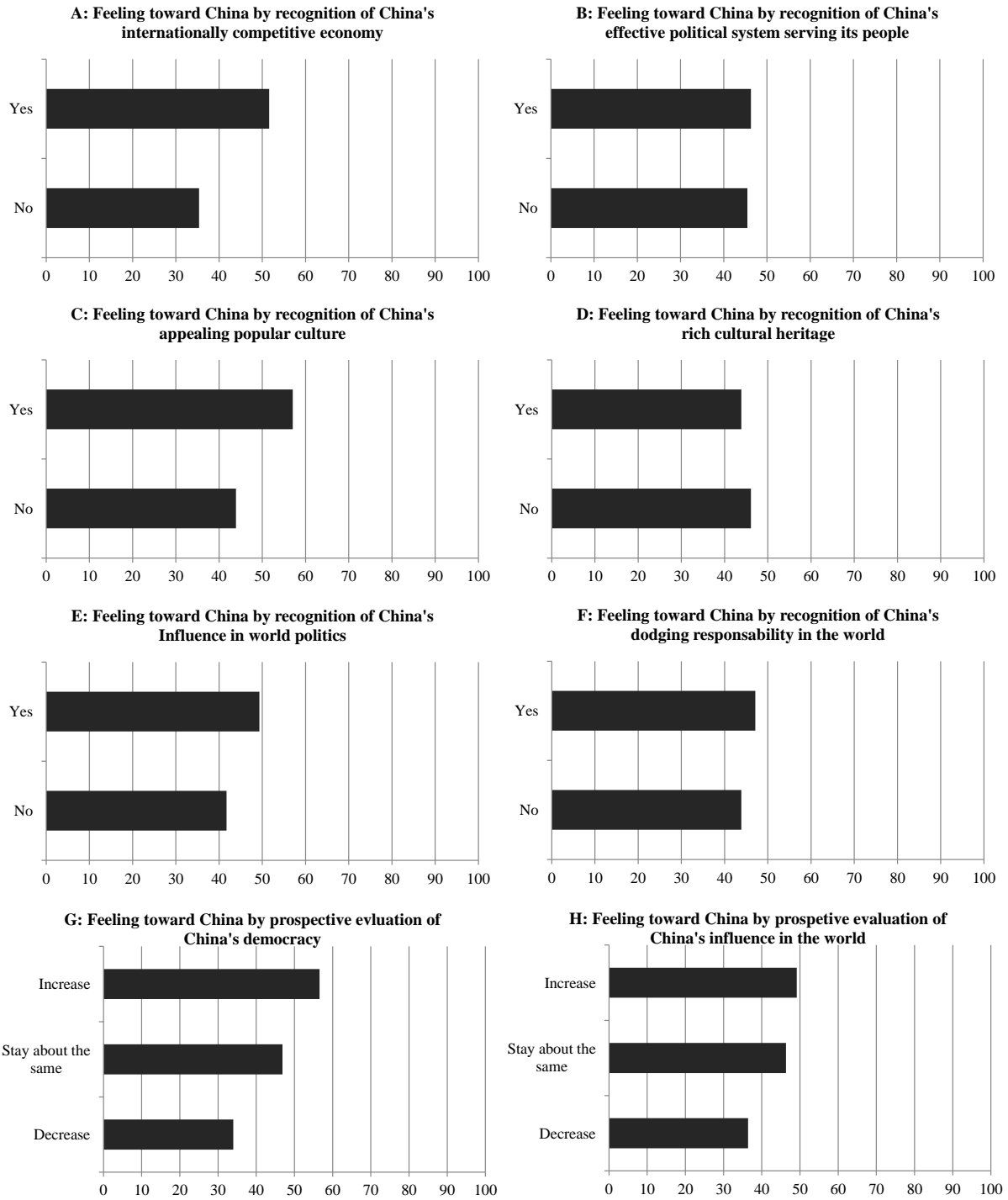
**Figure 2: American People’s Multidimensional Views of China**

### Feeling thermometer toward foreign countries



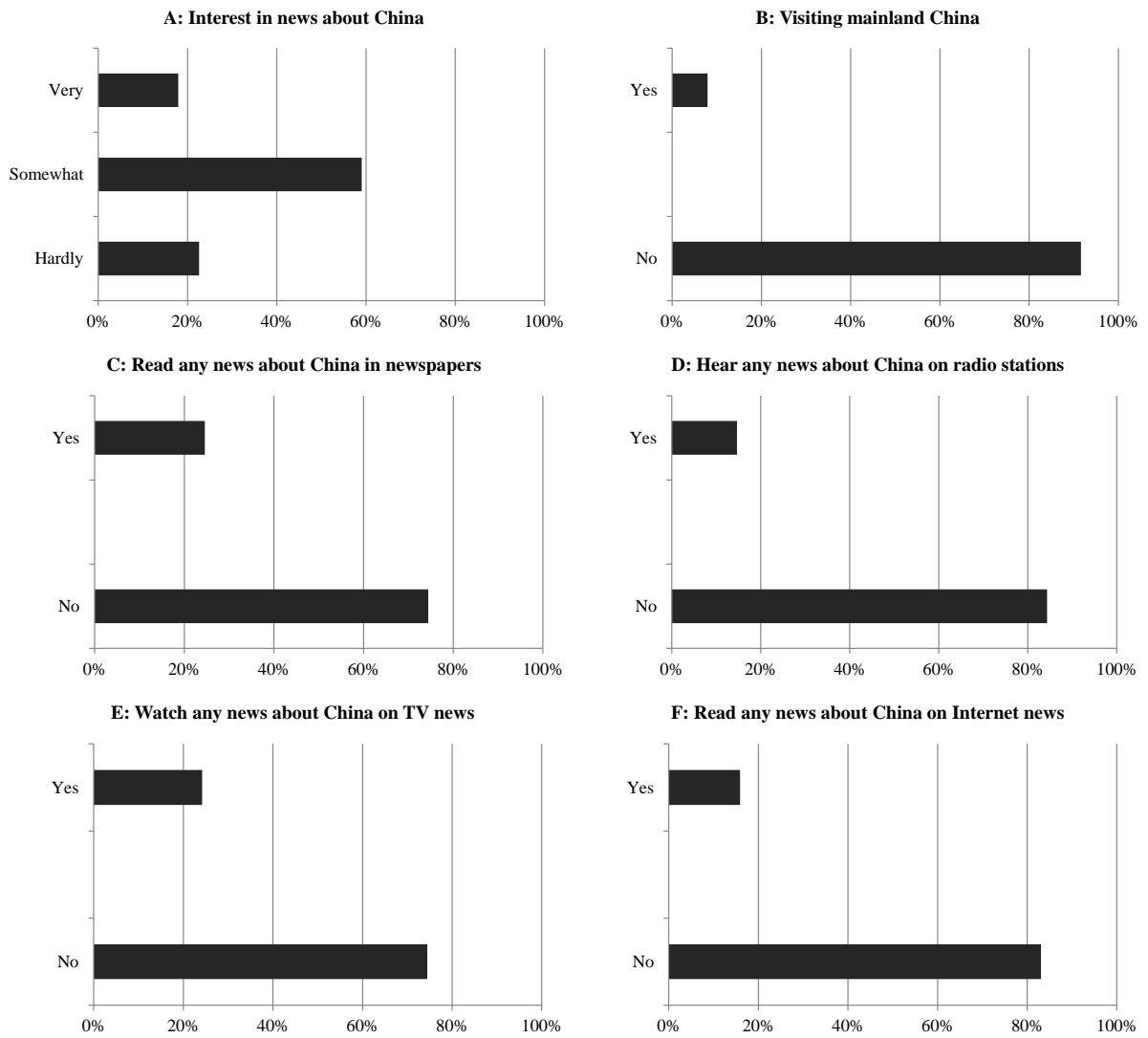
Source: AACS 2010 ( $N = 810$ ).

**Figure 3: General Feelings toward Some Foreign Countries in the US**



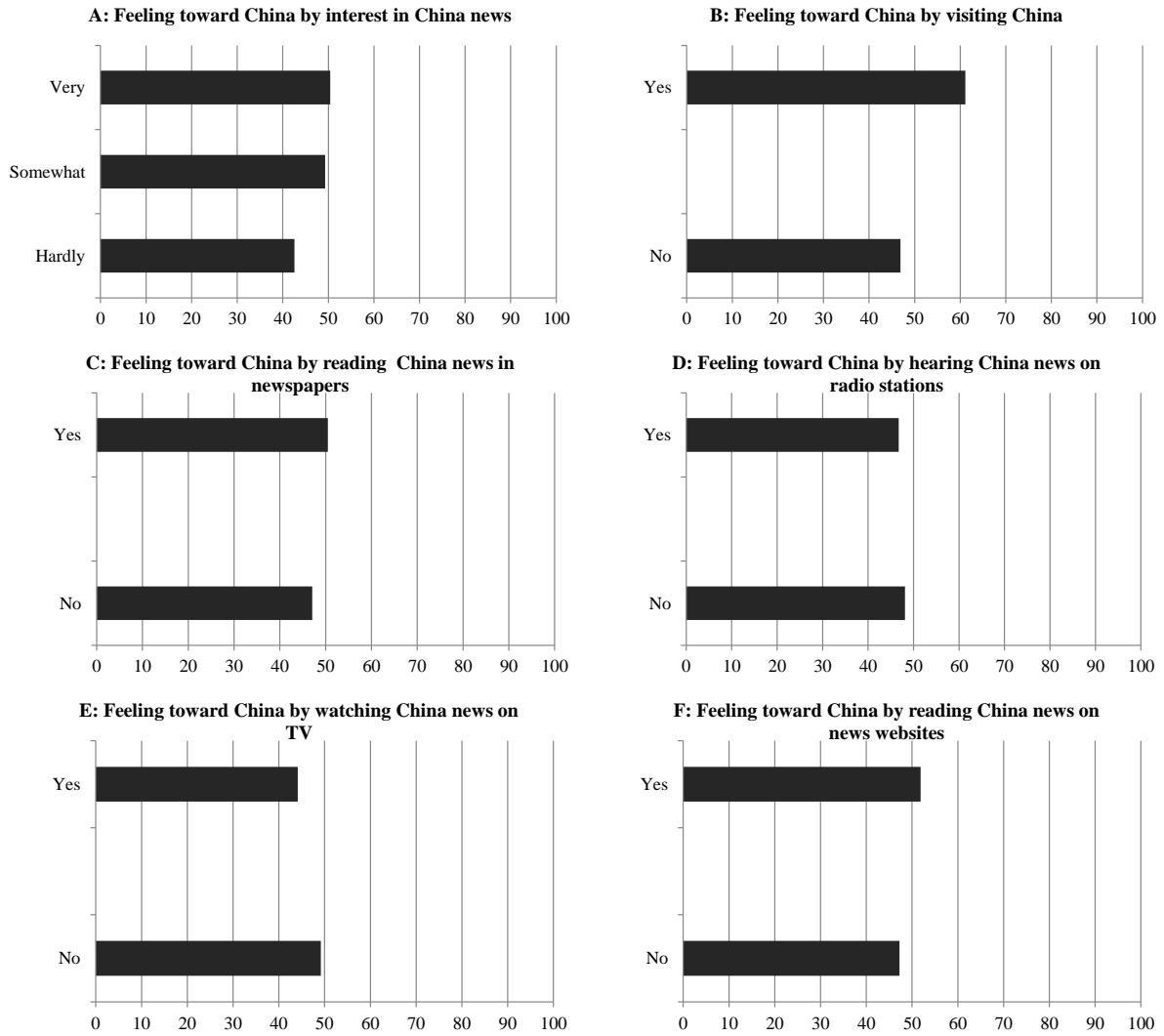
Source: AACS 2010 (N = 810).

**Figure 4: General Feeling and Distinct Assessments**



Source: AACS 2010 (N = 810).

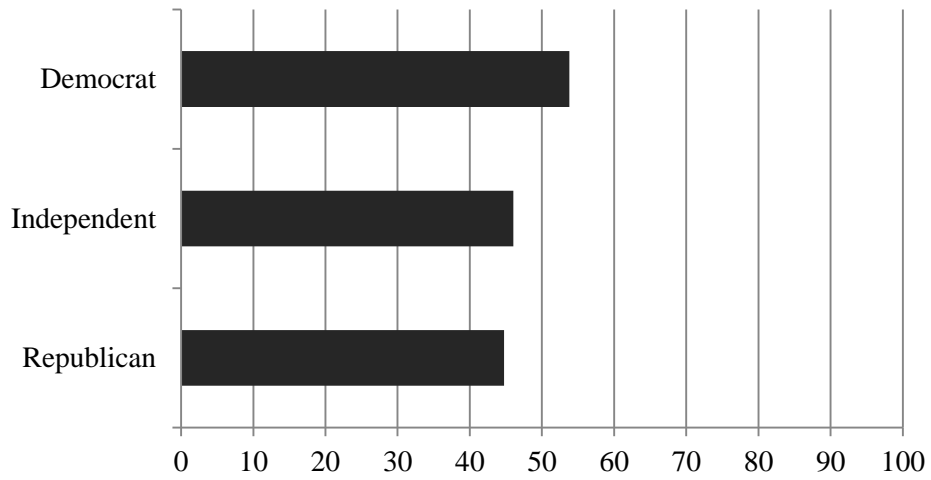
**Figure 5: Interest in and Sources of Information about China**



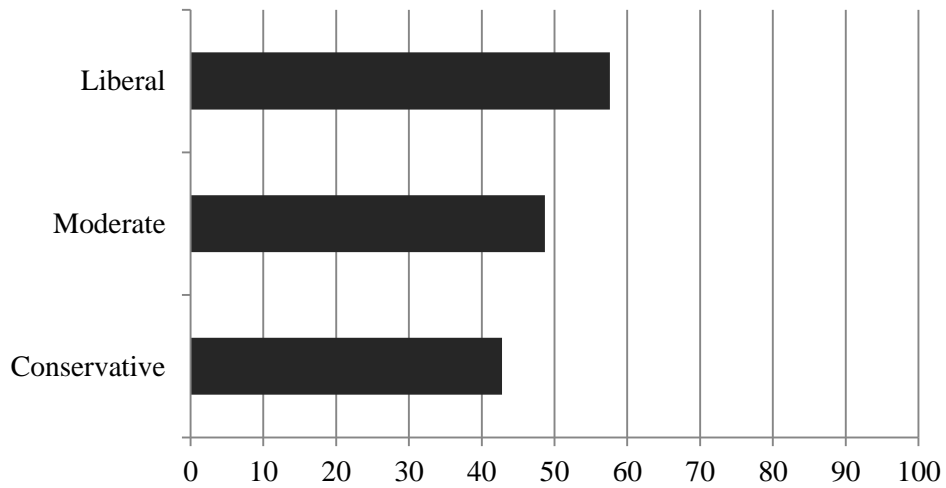
Source: AACCS 2010 (N = 810).

**Figure 6: General Feeling and Exposure to China-Related Information**

**A: Feeling toward China by party ID**



**B: Feeling toward China by ideology**



Source: AACS 2010 ( $N = 810$ ).

**Figure 7: General Feeling and Partisan-Ideological Predispositions**

**Table 1: OLS Regressions on the American Public's General Feeling toward China**

	M1	M2	M3	M4
<i>Demographic features</i>				
Age	-0.716 (0.293)**	-0.598 (0.267)**	-0.494 (0.267)*	-0.519 (0.268)*
Age square	0.005 (0.003)**	0.004 (0.002)*	0.003 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)*
Male	-0.841 (1.691)	-0.624 (1.590)	-0.127 (1.597)	-0.021 (1.603)
Education	5.055 (1.112)***	4.091 (1.107)***	3.085 (1.136)***	3.674 (1.081)***
Income	-0.839 (0.614)	-0.877 (0.567)	-0.712 (0.586)	-0.964 (0.581)*
<i>Assessment of China's varying aspects</i>				
Competitive economy		4.001 (1.165)***	3.669 (1.162)***	3.947 (1.166)***
Effective political system		-1.131 (1.068)	-1.213 (1.065)	-1.496 (1.082)
Appealing popular culture		8.305 (1.68)***	7.449 (1.261)***	7.360 (1.242)***
Rich cultural heritage		-3.119 (1.041)***	-3.134 (1.043)***	-3.675 (1.050)***
Influential in world politics		1.534 (1.206)	0.944 (1.174)	1.042 (1.211)
Dodging responsibility in the world		0.039 (1.178)	0.264 (1.196)	0.006 (1.158)
<i>Prospective evaluation</i>				
Democracy in ten years		8.781 (1.383)***	7.692 (1.439)***	8.307 (1.385)***
Influence in the world in ten years		1.269 (1.484)	0.851 (1.494)	1.125 (1.495)
<i>Information access</i>				
Newspapers			2.681 (2.161)	2.963 (1.129)
Radio stations			-4.306 (2.385)*	-4.084 (2.384)*
TV news			-3.559 (2.011)*	-3.718 (2.002)*
Internet news websites			-0.109 (2.533)	0.180 (2.457)
Visiting mainland China			9.693 (2.818)***	10.03 (2.875)***
<i>Ideology</i>				
Conservative			-3.814 (1.767)**	
Liberal			4.765 (2.327)**	
<i>Party ID</i>				
Republican				1.902 (2.013)
Democrat				7.671 (1.921)***
Intercept	58.11 (8.360)***	59.18 (7.570)***	60.25 (7.544)***	56.36 (7.612)***
<i>Model information</i>				
F	(5, 734) = 5.81***	(13, 702) = 14.89***	(20, 672) = 12.57***	(20, 680) = 12.92***
R-squared	0.0390	0.2028	0.2433	0.2515
Number of observations	740	716	693	701

Source: AACS 2010 ( $N = 810$ ).

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$  \*\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .