Chinese Perceptions of the US

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China’s New Media Environment

In spite of the authoritarian nature of rule in China, scholars recognize the influence mass opinion can carry in China. Research provides evidence that the state is responsive to nationalism in China (Shirk 2011, Gries 2004). This, in addition to the public’s role in affecting change in the areas of labor (Honda and Foxconn strikes, 2010) and environmental pollution (Qidong, 2012), suggests the utility of public opinion research in understanding China’s political environment. During the past decade, growth of the internet in China has led to a change in the availability of news sources for the more than 384 million users (see Table 1, in Appendix). In fact, the 2008 Texas A&M University China Survey shows that among internet users, Chinese are more than three times as likely to consult international websites and websites in Hong Kong and Taiwan as domestic websites for political news or sensitive domestic news (see Table 2, Appendix).

The shift of consuming political news outside the scope of state media control has driven researchers to speculate about effects on public opinion. So far, China scholars remain conflicted over the effect of news pluralization on mass public opinion in China. Survey-based research has found that Chinese netizens, in contrast to traditional media users and non-media users, are more politically opinionated, more likely to support norms of democracy, and more critical about the party state and political conditions in China (Ya-wen Lei 2011). Some scholars that are more skeptical about this sea change point to the power of censorship in China (Downey 2010) and the problem of digital divide (Margolis 2007).
News and Values

So far, the debate about liberalization in China is largely based on information about censorship and survey evidence. Although these methods provide detail that is integral to sorting out the liberalization question, there are inadequate for uncovering causal mechanisms, which may lead to new progress in the research stalemate. A promising way to complement previous research and overcome the limitations of previous research is through experimental methods. Through manipulation of key variables, experimental methods allow researchers to make clear causal arguments (McDermott, 2006). By focusing on individual-level causal mechanisms, experiments also present the opportunity to bridge individual level analysis to societal level findings (Feldman 2003).

Over the past two decades, media experiments have documented the powerful influence news coverage has on opinion formation (Gamson 1992; Iyengar 2001; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997), and include framing and agenda-setting effects. In comparative analysis, it is easiest to study framing effects. Framing can be understood as arising from the social construction of news: "A socially constructed product, news is influenced by a host of political, economic, and ideological factors, and open to a fascinating process of cognitive simplification called framing." (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998). Frames effect interpretation of news by promoting salience, through the selection and highlighting of certain information (Entman, 1993). Functionally speaking, frames define problems, diagnose causes, cast moral judgments and suggest remedies.

Nelson et al. (1997) argue that media frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, or other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame. Such media studies are largely
specific to the US, and theories may not adapt coherently in other contexts, such as China. However, research that examines both media effects and the impact of values may be a promising way to contribute to the debate about whether the new media environment in China has a liberalizing effect.

Comparative news studies have demonstrated that mainland China’s coverage of news differs from news outside China in fundamental ways (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad 1998; Min Wu 2006). * Media content may sometimes reflect an individualism-collectivism dichotomy of the original culture; in the 2011 Libyan civil war conflict, China’s state coverage emphasized the collective good of social stability whereas the US Associated Press put greater emphasis on individual liberties such as freedom of speech and democratic determination (Martin, 2011 seminar paper). The qualitative assessment of frames in coverage is based on careful reading of the sampled stories and identification of key words, metaphors, and concepts emphasized in news narratives, as suggested by Entman (Entman 1991, 7). Based on this analysis, three key frames were found to dominate AP coverage: 1) the illegitimate nature of Gadhafi's rule; 2) the rebels as protagonists; and 3) the humanitarian goal of individual liberties and democracy. The Xinhua analysis yielded four pervasive frames: 1) evacuating Chinese in Libya; 2) illegitimacy of US goals; 3) international community consensus; 4) humanitarian goals of achieving peace and respecting sovereignty.

A quantitative analysis was conducted in order to confirm whether the coverage in Xinhua and AP differed statistically in terms of content. Key words were identified for a “collective good” frame: stability, order, territorial integrity, safety, sovereignty and an “individual liberties” frame: protesters, crackdown, reform, freedom, democracy. Coverage of the initial civil war period in Libya, February 15, 2011 to March 27, 2011, yielded 39 articles
(observations) in Xinhua and 98 articles (observations) in the Associated Press. Articles were
coded for the appearance of key words; each reference of a key word was entered a maximum of
once per article, to create a statistically more challenging difference of means test.

The disparity in the use of frames in Xinhua and AP is supported by difference of means
tests. The collective good frame was used significantly more by Xinhua (M = 1.28, SD = .21)
than AP (M = .19, SD = .04) \( t (135) = -7.23, p = .0000, \) one-tailed (see Table 3, Appendix). In AP,
key words in the individual liberties frame were used significantly more often (M = .76, SD =
.10) than Xinhua (M = .08, SD = .04) \( t (135) = 4.06, p = .0000, \) one-tailed (see Table 4,
Appendix).

Collectivism

There is a long tradition of Western researchers, such as Durkheim, Weber, Tonnies,
Toqueville, in observing individualist and collective focus in cultures (Oyserman et al., 2002).
Hofstede’s seminal work on cultural values in the early 1980s identified four dimensions that he
referred to as individualism, masculinity, power distance and uncertainty. The fact that early
cultural values dimensions, such as Hofstede’s, were spawned of a Western research tradition,
led researchers to search for validation from Chinese researchers that the value dimensions were
unbiased. In the late 1980s, a list of 33 values (known as the Chinese Values Survey) was
prepared by Chinese social scientists and participants from 22 countries were surveyed. The
results of the survey supported three of Hofstede’s four original value dimensions, including that
of individualism-collectivism.

According to political culture literature, China and the US are believed to differ in terms
of the individualism-collectivism dimension (Hofstede 1980; Schwartz 1997). This is considered
a central value dimension in cross-cultural values literature (Feldman, 2003.) The definition of collectivism has a number of variations; this paper will adopt Oyserman’s definition: “The core element of collectivism is the assumption that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals.” (Oyserman et al. 2002, 5)

Comparative media research, such as Xinhua and AP coverage of the Libyan civil war, demonstrate that some news content may differ along the individualism-collectivism dimension. Given exposure to news frames outside of state control, Chinese are now encountering news that is incongruent with the value of collectivism. By incorporating what is known from cross-cultural values research, the research question of whether the new media environment will liberalize China, can be crafted into a more specific question: will collectivist values mediate the effect of liberal news frames? It is hypothesized that the value of collectivism will reduce support for individual liberties when they are in tension with the collective good.

Research Design

To investigate the research question, I conducted a pilot experiment this summer (2012) with university students at Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) in Guangzhou, China. With the assistance of professors and graduate students at Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) in Guangzhou, China, 208 college students were recruited for the study and participated in one of six research sessions. The students were drawn from undergraduate and graduate populations and disproportionately drew from majors such as government and law.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that included psychological measures of collectivism and the modern racism scale. The collectivism measure (taken from the collectivism-individualism dimension of Confucian Values from The Global Dispersion of
Chinese Values) is necessary for the primary research hypothesis. A measure of racism was included (Modern Racism Scale), since this is another value that is likely to affect attitudes of tolerance toward the KKK, as well as demographic information, such as year and gender.

The media content chosen for the study included two news articles about the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the US. There were three main advantages to using this material. First, the two KKK news frames fit the pattern of collective good frame vs. individual liberties frame that were found in Xinhua and AP news, by positioning KKK rallies as either a matter of free speech or disruptive to public order. Thus, it provided a good initial test of how individual values will mediate the effect of collective good vs. individual liberty news frames. Second, this content has previously been tested in the US context in a study about tolerance for the Ku Klux Klan (Nelson, et al. 1997). In the study, researchers found that media frames affected public opinion by altering the perceived importance of public order values, rather than by merely altering the accessibility of the concepts. Since the frames have been previously shown to alter opinion, this study is able to start from this point and further gauge the effect of values separate from the framing effect. Finally, as my first original research endeavor in China, using news content about social issues in the US was less sensitive than news about China’s domestic issues.

Before reading an article, all participants were given the same basic information about the KKK in order to control for knowledge about the group (see Appendix A for an English translation about the information). Based on a simple randomization procedure where booklets were handed out in 1-2-1-2 order, students read one of two possible news articles about the KKK. In the first condition, the article emphasizes KKK members’ right to free speech. The second condition emphasizes the priority of safety for the community (see Appendix A for English version of news text).
After reading the news article, students were asked to report their tolerance for the KKK. “Do you support or oppose allowing members of the Ku Klux Klan to hold public rallies? “ and “Do you support or oppose allowing members of the Ku Klux Klan to make a speech?”. The participants reported a response based on a Likert Scale of 1 (strongly support) to 7 (strongly oppose).

Findings

After collecting data at SYSU, I coded data and conducted statistical analysis. First, a simple difference of means test confirmed that news conditions successfully and significantly affected tolerance for the KKK. The results show significance at the .0020 level, two-tailed (see Table 5, Appendix). Using regression analysis, I tested the hypotheses of the study. The primary hypothesis — that collectivist values will decrease tolerance for the Ku Klux Klan in the US — found strong support in the study (see Table 6, below). A secondary hypothesis: explicit measures of racism will correspond to greater tolerance, also found support. However, racism was only significant when combined with the frame as an interaction term. These findings suggest that certain values may influence the formation of opinion, even in the face of influential media frames. The question remains whether values will play a larger role in news more relevant to Chinese.
The pilot study undertaken during summer 2012 provided preliminary support for my hypotheses that strong collectivist values correspond to lower tolerance for KKK demonstrations in the US. More importantly, the effect of collectivism is significant even controlling for framing effects of news content, suggesting that news frames will have different effects on people or within cultures with different values. Although this is not a counterintuitive finding, it is important because it is a step in the direction of narrowing down the role of values in opinion formation; specifically, identifying a content in which the Chinese cultural variable of collectivism may limit or mediate the influence of news in opinion formation. More generally, the evidence provides some tentative support for the notion that increased media exposure will not necessarily lead to simple westernization of views in China.
Conclusions

In addition to the interesting substantive results, my findings from this project support the notion that this line of research is a fruitful one. Through continued research, key variables and their moderating effects on opinion formation may be uncovered. These discoveries will lead to insight into how China’s changing media environment, where exposure to news content that is not regulated by the state is becoming more prevalent, will affect public opinion.

The goal of this project is to improve the understanding of mass opinion formation in China. The experimental research allows careful control of independent variables (news content) and the isolation of mediating values variables that are prevalent in China. Thus, it is possible to glean detailed information about how cultural variables intervene in China’s recently pluralized media environment and make specific predictions about the impact of pluralization. In addition to the contribution this project aspires to make within the field of comparative politics, it is also my hope that research done in the Chinese content will help to improve theories (largely from the US) about public opinion formation. As scholar Peter Hays Gries notes, “China scholars are well positioned to challenge and reshape theories inductively derived from the Western experience that do not travel well to China” (Gries, 2010, p. 84).

Future Research

In future work, I plan to continue designing and implementing experiments in China in order to advance political psychology literature. Recent advances in the field of social cognition on the topics of perspective taking, the role of self in understanding others, in-group, out-group behavior and facial perception provide a rich basis for this line of academic inquiry. It is my
hope to run experiments with different populations in China. This research agenda can determine whether the findings hold across different demographics, and possibly identify new key mediating variables.

In continuing this research endeavor, I intend to incorporate news content that is more relevant to the Chinese public. By using news content about the KKK in the US, I was able to test my hypotheses with a non-sensitive concept. In the next stages of research, I would like to use news content about China’s foreign policy and domestic issues. The advantages are two-fold: first, the issues will be more relevant for Chinese news consumers, and thus findings should have greater external validity. Second, findings will contribute more directly to big questions in comparative politics, perhaps providing clues about factors in authoritarian resilience.

Second, I will incorporate more experimental design techniques to exploit advantages of the method. For example, real news content and artificial news conditions can be added in order to maximize external and internal validity. It will also be useful to test consumption of different news mediums, such as television broadcasts, newspapers and online reports in order to uncover whether the role of values in opinion formation is sensitive to the way news is consumed. Combined with the knowledge we have about trends of political news sources from survey research, information about cognitive process with respect to news mediums may allow for nuanced speculation about future trends in Chinese public opinion.

Finally, although the experimental method solves short-term problems of endogeneity, it cannot rule out the possibility that news content affects values over a long time period. In order to gain leverage on this problem, it will be useful to extend research in one of two directions: either by collecting pooled data in China or through comparison with another population. To this ends, it is necessary to collect data from a population with similar collectivist values that has
been exposed to an open media environment for an extended period of time, such as people in Hong Kong or Taiwan.
Appendix

Table 1. China’s new media environment: internet users in China 2000-2009

![Bar chart showing internet users in China 2000-2009](source: www.internetworldstats.com)
Table 2. China’s new media environment: web sources for learning about political issues and important domestic issues

2008 TAMU China Survey

(weighted %)

n=3991
Table 3. Collective Good frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>[95% Conf. Interval]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.1938776</td>
<td>.0426804</td>
<td>.4225149</td>
<td>.1091687 to .2785864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhua</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1.282051</td>
<td>.2140438</td>
<td>1.336703</td>
<td>.8487423 to 1.71536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combined</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>.5036496</td>
<td>.079665</td>
<td>.9324548</td>
<td>.3461073 to .661192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.088174</td>
<td>.1504191</td>
<td>-1.385656</td>
<td>-.7906911</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

diff = mean(AP) - mean(Xinhua)

Ho: diff = 0
t = -7.2343

degrees of freedom = 135

Ha: diff < 0

Pr(T < t) = 0.0000

Ha: diff != 0

Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.0000

Ha: diff > 0

Pr(T > t) = 1.0000

Table 4. Individual Liberties frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>[95% Conf. Interval]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.755102</td>
<td>.1036482</td>
<td>1.026065</td>
<td>.5493891 to .960815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhua</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>.0769231</td>
<td>.043227</td>
<td>.2699528</td>
<td>-.0105855 to .1644316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combined</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>.5620438</td>
<td>.0794878</td>
<td>.9303803</td>
<td>.4048519 to .7192357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>.678179</td>
<td>.1668855</td>
<td>.3481308</td>
<td>1.008227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

diff = mean(AP) - mean(Xinhua)

Ho: diff = 0
t = 4.0637

degrees of freedom = 135

Ha: diff < 0

Pr(T < t) = 1.0000

Ha: diff != 0

Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.0001

Ha: diff > 0

Pr(T > t) = 0.0000

Appendix A
The Klu Klux Klan is an organization in the United States with approximately 3000 to 5000 members as of 2012. It advocates white supremacy, white nationalism, and anti-immigration, previously through acts of terrorism.

Group 1
Free Speech Headline: Ku Klux Klan Tests OSU’s Commitment to Free Speech How far is OSU prepared to go to protect freedom of speech?

The Ku Klux Klan has requested a permit to conduct a speech and rally on the Ohio State campus during the Winter Quarter of 1997. Officials and administrators will decide whether to approve or deny the request in December. Numerous courts have ruled that the U.S. Constitution ensures that the Klan has the right to speak and hold rallies on public grounds, and that individuals have the right to hear the Klan's message if they are interested. Many of the Klan's appearances around Ohio have been marked by violent clashes between Klan supporters and counterdemonstrators who show up to protest the Klan's racist activities. In one confrontation last October in Chillicothe, Ohio, several bystanders were injured by rocks thrown by Klan supporters and protesters. Usually, a large police force is needed to control the crowds. Opinion about the speech and rally is mixed. Many students, faculty, and staff worry about the rally, but support the group's right to speak. Clifford Strong, a professor in the law school, remarked, "I hate the Klan, but they have the right to speak, and people have the right to hear them if they want to. We may have some concerns about the rally, but the right to speak and hear what you want takes precedence over our fears about what could happen."

Group 2
Public Order Headline: Possible Ku Klux Klan Rally Raises Safety Concerns Can campus police prevent a riot if the KKK comes to town?

The Ku Klux Klan has requested a permit to conduct a speech and rally on the Ohio State campus during the Winter Quarter of 1997. Officials and administrators will decide whether to approve or deny the request in December. Numerous courts have ruled that the U.S. Constitution ensures that the Klan has the right to speak and hold rallies on public grounds, and that individuals have the right to hear the Klan's message if they are interested. Many of the Klan's appearances around Ohio have been marked by violent clashes between Klan supporters and counterdemonstrators who show up to protest the Klan's racist activities. In one confrontation last October in Chillicothe, Ohio, several bystanders were injured by rocks thrown by Klan supporters and protesters. Usually, a large police force is needed to control the crowds. Opinion about the speech and rally is mixed. Many students, faculty, and staff have expressed great concern about campus safety and security during a Klan rally. Clifford Strong, a professor in the law school, remarked, "Freedom of speech is important, but so is the safety of the OSU community and the security of our campus. Considering the violence at past KKK rallies, I don't think the University has an obligation to allow this to go on. Safety must be our top priority."
Table 5. Difference of means test for Experiment Frames

Two-sample t test with equal variances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>[95% Conf. Interval]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2.824324</td>
<td>.1613967</td>
<td>1.388387</td>
<td>2.502661 3.145988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.532895</td>
<td>.1576515</td>
<td>1.374374</td>
<td>3.218837 3.846953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combined</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>3.183333</td>
<td>.11609</td>
<td>1.421806</td>
<td>2.953938 3.412729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.7085704</td>
<td>.225586</td>
<td>-1.154356</td>
<td>-.2627848</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \text{diff} = \text{mean}(0) - \text{mean}(1) \quad t = -3.1410 \]

Ho: \( \text{diff} = 0 \quad \text{degrees of freedom} = 148 \)

Ha: \( \text{diff} < 0 \quad \text{Ha: diff} 
eq 0 \quad \text{Ha: diff} > 0 \)

\[ \Pr(T < t) = 0.0010 \quad \Pr(|T| > |t|) = 0.0020 \quad \Pr(T > t) = 0.9990 \]
References


