

## In the eye of the beholder

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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Public Opinion Research

*DOI:*  
[10.1093/ijpor/edx010](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edx010)

Published: 01/09/2018

*Document Version:*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Fung, T. K. F., Yan, W., & Akin, H. (2018). In the eye of the beholder: How news media exposure and audience schema affect the image of the United States among the Chinese public. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 30(3), 443-472. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edx010>

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In the eye of the beholder: How news media exposure and audience schema affect the image of the United States among the Chinese public

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### **Acknowledgement**

The authors express thanks to Committee of 100 to provide the survey data for this study. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this manuscript are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Committee of 100.

### Abstract

This study presents a theoretical framework that examines foreign publics' use of foreign news from domestic media and pre-existing schema to form an image of another nation. To test the proposed theoretical framework, we examined Chinese citizens' image of the United States using the data from a survey collected from a representative sample of Chinese adults. The findings suggest that the role of foreign news from domestic media is conditional on pre-existing schema, including individuals' patriotism and whether they have traveled to the United States. We conclude by discussing the implications of the results for research investigating national image and stakeholders interested in predictors of national image.

*Keywords:* national image, public diplomacy, China, the United States, foreign news, schema

In an era of rapid globalization, a country's image abroad is increasingly important to national governments (Gilboa, 2008). Favorable views toward a nation held by foreign publics can have significant political and economic implications for a country. Politically, a country's image represents its status in the international community (Wang, 2006) and is an indicator of its soft power if its culture, political ideals, and policies are viewed favorably by outsiders (Nye, 2008). If foreign publics see a country positively, it can translate into support for reciprocal international policies (Nye, 2008), suggesting international public opinion influences a country's ability to form coalitions and to achieve international goals (Wang, 2006). Research in global marketing and advertising suggests a positive national image can also have financial benefits, affecting foreigners' decisions to buy a country's consumer products and services (Kang & Yang, 2010), or travel to, invest in, or start a business in that country (Anholt, 2007; Wang, 2006). Collectively, these decisions can significantly contribute to a country's income. Given the consequences, leaders of globally prominent nations increasingly strive to improve their national image (Gilboa, 2008) through a range of strategies that are a part of a country's public diplomacy efforts.

Many studies that examine the conceptual link between foreign news from domestic media and people's image of foreign countries lack an integrated theoretical framework (Elasmar, 2007). The lack of theory-based research inhibits systematic understanding of the processes underlying how foreign news from domestic media influence people's image of the foreign country and why these effects vary. To address this need, we propose a theoretical model by adapting the susceptible imported media (SIM) model (Elasmar, 2003) to advance our understanding of the conditions under which foreign news from domestic sources and individuals' pre-existing schema influence a nation's image in the eyes of foreign publics.

To empirically test our model, we examine Chinese citizens' image of the United States using data from a nationally representative survey of Chinese adults. Sino-American

relations afford an appropriate context to study national image because the U.S. and China have one of the century's most important bilateral international relationships and the U.S. has put considerable work into cultivating its public image in China (Ross, 2015). But little work has examined how Chinese people form such a view of the United States (Zhang, 2010). Therefore, this study has two goals: (1) provide a theoretical explanation of the conditions under which foreign news from domestic media and individuals' pre-existing schema jointly influence a nation's image in the eyes of foreign publics and (2) provide insights for scholars, governments, policymakers, and others interested in understanding this process as a public diplomacy strategy. Because such survey-based analyses are rare, the results can benefit public opinion scholars and other stakeholders interested in these relationships.

### **A Theoretical Model of National Image**

National image refers to an individual's mental representation of a given country and its people (Kunczik, 2000), which is usually a composite of affective and cognitive evaluations (He, Chen, & Wu, 2012). Affective evaluations denote individuals' favorable or unfavorable feelings toward a given country, whereas cognitive evaluations represent knowledge and beliefs about that country and its people (He et al., 2012). Typically, individuals evaluate a country and its people based on the country's political, economic, social, cultural, historical and military characteristics.

### **The Role of Foreign News Exposure in National Image**

Foreign news refers to news about other countries which is produced domestically (Shoemaker, Cohen, Seo, & Johnson, 2012). Rarely do we experience what is happening in a foreign nation directly; instead, our exposure usually comes from the foreign news coverage that airs or is published within a country (Buchanan & Cantril, 1953), making it an important force shaping one's image of other nations (Kunczik, 2000). Prior research provides evidence

that domestic news coverage of a foreign nation can affect public perception of that nation (e.g., McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; Perry, 1985).

Although foreign news is regarded as an important source, its effects on audiences' national image can be conditional on other factors (Elasmar, 2007). For example, Korzenny, Toro, and Gaudino (1987) found that the effect of foreign news on people's knowledge and attitude toward foreign affairs varied by the news medium (i.e., newspapers, news magazines, TV news, and radio news). Another study revealed that foreign news from domestic media was less influential on Americans' attitudes when it came to countries they have more direct contact with (e.g., Canada and China) than those they have less contact with (e.g., North Korea, Jordan, and Afghanistan), (Wang, Shoemaker, Han, & Storm, 2008). Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver, and Willnat (1992) found that exposure to news coverage about foreign affairs significantly predicted Americans' opinions of foreign countries, but only until a predictor of affinity (i.e., have friends or relatives from the country or have visited the region) was added into the analysis. Kepplinger, Brosius, and Staab (1991) found individuals' values mediate their exposure to foreign news from domestic media, that is, individuals' values guide what news they attend to and affect their attitude toward a nation. These mixed findings suggest the process underlying national image formation and the influence of foreign news media content is complex, warranting scholarship that scrutinizes the factors and delineating conditions under which news coverage impact national image.

### **The Role of Audience's Pre-existing Schema in National Image**

Scholarship illustrating media's somewhat limited effects on national image is consistent with research on message processing that asserts news exposure does not have a strong and homogenous effects across an audience (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Instead, the processing and interpreting of media messages depends on audiences' pre-existing schema, which are used as frames of reference when interpreting news content (Fung & Scheufele, 2012).

Schema are “individual cognitive elements such as objects, people, events, and so on, as well as systems composed of these elements, such as narratives, belief systems, and mental models of physical systems” (Read & Miller, 1994, p. 214). When exposed to a news story, audience members are likely to relate its content to pre-existing schema and interrelationships among schemas (Hawkins & Daly, 1988). Empirical evidence supports the role of pre-existing schema in news processing (e.g., Fung, Brossard, & Ng, 2011). In the context of national image, Nisbet, Nisbet, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2004) analyzed Muslim public opinion about the United States and found that people use their predispositions as “perceptual filters” when selecting and interpreting news content, choosing the ideas that resonate with their pre-existing attitudes toward the United States while rejecting those that are uncongenial.

To capture this dynamic between pre-existing schema and media exposure to information about foreign nations, Elasmr (2003) proposes a susceptibility to imported media (SIM) model outlining how domestic audiences are exposed to and process the content of imported entertainment media (e.g., foreign TV programs), and how this content affects audiences’ opinions of the foreign nation and its people. The SIM model postulates that domestic audiences’ susceptibility to imported media content depends on pre-existing schema (e.g., knowledge and values related to the program’s country of origin) and finds audiences are more influenced by the imported media content if it is consistent with these schema.

Elasmr (2007) then refined the SIM model by deriving a path model to examine attitudes toward the United States and support for the U.S.-led war on terror held by Muslims from seven Islamic countries. Not only pre-existing schema (e.g., affinity) and exposure to U.S. entertainment media content have direct, positive influence on support for U.S. foreign policy (i.e., support for the U.S.-led war on terror), but exposure to U.S. entertainment media content also mediates the influence of pre-existing schema (e.g., pre-existing affinity) on support for U.S. foreign policy (i.e., support for the U.S.-led war on terror).

Although Elasmars's SIM model has found empirical support for the influence of imported entertainment media, a theoretical framework that is specific and relevant to the context of national image and exposure to foreign news content is lacking. Furthermore, theory-driven, survey-based analysis of the influence of foreign news on foreign citizens' image of another nation is sparse. Therefore, our study attempts to address this research gap by building on the SIM model and proposing a theoretical framework of national image.

### **Toward A Model of National Image**

Based on the literature on foreign news and national image, we adapted the SIM model to propose a theoretical framework to explicate the role of foreign news in the cognitive process of forming an image of a foreign nation. The goals of this proposed framework are threefold: (1) to outline the cognitive process of how foreign news from domestic media in one's country influence one's image of another country, (2) to specify the conditions in which foreign news from domestic media will (or will not) have an effect and, (3) to describe the types of effect on one's image of another country.

Figure 1 outlines the three major components in the model of national image, which includes pre-existing schema, foreign news exposure, and a dependent variable of image of a foreign nation. One independent variable in the model is pre-existing schema related to one's own country and the foreign nation (Read & Miller, 1994). According to a review of the literature on national image and foreign policy (Elasmars, 2007), pre-existing schema that are relevant to the formation of national image include travel experience, predispositions such as patriotism, individual values, knowledge, and ideology.

[Figure 1 about here]

The independent variable in the model of foreign news use refers to individuals' exposure to news content about a foreign nation that is broadcasted and printed in media within one's country. Foreign news coverage in domestic media potentially influences foreign

citizens' image of another country in two ways. One way is through gatekeeping and agenda-setting process (Rosengren, 1974; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Even though foreign news tends to take up a significant proportion of all news (Whitney, Fritzler, Jones, Mazzarella, & Rakow, 1989), time and space restraints compel news editors to select only a small amount of these news stories (Wanta et al., 2004). How stories about particular nations and global affairs are selected and deemed newsworthy by gatekeepers has been a topic of scholarly interest, and research sheds light on what factors contribute to news editors' decisions to air or publish coverage of certain nations (for a review, see Shoemaker et al., 2012; Wanta & Hu, 1993). Gatekeeping is a key step in the agenda-setting effects of foreign news (Wanta et al., 2004). As gatekeepers opt to feature specific nations in a country's domestic media, the more salient those nations will seem to the audience. Evidence from experiments have corroborated the agenda-setting impact of foreign news from domestic media on individuals' perceptions of foreign nations and world affairs (Wanta & Hu, 1993). As one example, Wanta et al. (2004) showed that the more negatively domestic media portray a foreign nation, the more negatively citizens view that nation.

Another way that foreign news influences an audience's national image is by news framing. Events that occur in another nation tend to feature contexts that are unfamiliar to domestic audiences and so journalists will situate them in the society's political and economic structure to make them more accessible. Journalists are also influenced by their dominant culture, ideology, political and economic powers, and national interest in the news making process (Nossek, 2004) and will rely on these perspectives to render foreign or international topics more understandable, relevant, and appealing to their local audience. In this way, journalists reconstruct meanings from events that are more consistent with their own dominant ideology and culture, and in turn "domesticate" them to resonate with the political, economic, and socio-cultural makeup of their audience (Cohen, Levy, Roeh, & Gurevitch,

1996; Lee, Chan, & Zhou, 2011). Accumulated evidence from content analysis studies show that different countries' news media emphasize the same foreign and international affairs through their own "national lenses," so the same issue will be presented differently depending on the local audience (e.g., Entman, 1993; Lee & Yang, 1995). To domesticate foreign and international issues to local audience, journalists will engage in a process of reframing that places more emphasis on aspects of foreign and international affairs that are more compatible with their country's social, political and cultural characteristics (Clausen, 2004; Nossek, 2004). Framing effects of foreign news content will occur if audiences accept and give higher priority to that new information (Chong & Druckman, 2007) and empirical evidence supports that news framing can affect individuals' image of another nation. For instance, Brewer, Graf, and Willnat (2003) found that when American participants read a news story linking Mexico and Colombia as allies in the U.S. war on drugs, they were more likely to see the two countries favorably than those in a control group, suggesting that news framing a topic as a bilateral alliance with one's home country can cultivate a more favorable image of a country.

Based on the literature we have outlined, our proposed model of national image hypothesizes that domestic audiences will process foreign news by relying in part on their pre-existing schema. Meanwhile, consistent with gatekeeping and agenda-setting processes, only a limited number of nations will be featured on the news agenda of a particular nation, making these nations more accessible in local audience's minds and seemingly more salient to one's own country. We also posit that local audiences rely on their pre-existing schema when determining their interest in such a news story, while the framing of the story and their relevant schema may jointly determine how likely it is they will be receptive to its content (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Altogether, these effects may influence the local audience's affective and cognitive evaluations of a nation. Using the Chinese public's image of the United States as a case study, we examine the utility of this proposed model.

**Study Context: The Relationship between the United States and China**

The relationship between the United States and China has been characterized as both adversarial and collaborative, with the nations cooperating at times and competing at others (National Committee on American Foreign Policy, 2016; Paulson & Rubin, 2015). Conflict between the two countries often originates from economic tensions (e.g., China's control of its exchange rate or the U.S. controlling its exports), geopolitical friction (e.g., China's assertive military actions in the East and South China Seas or U.S. naval surveillance off China's coasts), or ideological divides (e.g., human rights, democracy). However, the United States has a strong interest in China's consumer market and has promoted U.S. investment in China in order to revitalize its own economy and create jobs. Similarly, China has a strong interest in the U.S.'s recovery from the 2008 financial crisis and has attempted to establish monetary policies that sustain both countries' economic growth.

From the public's perspective, many Chinese people deeply distrust the U.S.'s policies and intentions in foreign relations (Buckley, 2015). According to a recent public opinion poll, around half of Chinese respondents (49%) see the United States in a negative light (Pew, 2015), with Chinese attitudes toward the United States growing more negative since the 1990s (Shi, Lu, & Aldrich, 2011). Many believe the United States would like to prevent China from becoming too powerful (Pew, 2015). Given China's prominent role in global and U.S. foreign affairs, cultivating a positive image among the Chinese public is in the economic and political interests of the United States, and its government has grown increasingly concerned about its reputation. To date, however, little empirical work has documented the factors influencing the U.S.'s public image in China. Although China is an authoritarian state, domestic public opinion increasingly has an influence on the country's foreign policy (Reilly, 2012), making its citizens' image of the United States relevant to the U.S. government.

**Pre-existing Schema: Patriotism and Travel to the United States**

Because past studies have shown that a predisposition of patriotism and travel experience are potential schema that contribute to national image, we focus on these in our theoretical framework examining national image. Patriotism is a pre-existing schema of being “sentimentally attached to the homeland (affectively involved), motivated to help their country (goal-oriented) and gain a sense of identity and self-esteem through their national identification (ego-involved)” (Druckman, 1994, p. 63). Patriotism is relevant when considering views toward other nations because it represents a critical awareness of one’s national belonging, loyalty to their country, and part of one’s identity (Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001). Research provides empirical support that patriotism affects individuals’ judgments and attitudes about other nations and their foreign policy (e.g., Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990), schematically positioning another country in relation to one’s own. Patriotism is closely related to nationalism, or a sense one’s own country is superior to others that can manifest as hostility toward other nations (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). The two are linked to views about foreign nations and their policies in part because both predispositions are rooted in a desire to view one’s own nation positively and prefer one’s own country over any other.

In Chinese Communist Party discourse, nationalist sentiments are often branded as patriotism (Zhao, 1998). In CCP’s terms, patriotism “portrays the Communist state as the embodiment of the nation’s will, seeking for its goals the kind of loyalty and support granted the nation itself and trying to create a sense of nationhood among all its citizens” (Zhao, 1998, p. 291), which Zhao (1998) argues is actually state-led nationalism. The CCP has utilized nationalist discourse in domestic media and elsewhere since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China to secure its legitimacy and reconsolidate its regime following the 1989 Tiananmen incident (Zhao, 1998). A prior study has shown patriotism exerts influence on

Chinese people's foreign policy preferences (Sinkkonen, 2013). With our focus on the pre-existing schema of patriotism, we posit that:

*H1a: Patriotism will be significantly associated with Chinese citizens' image of the United States.*

Travel and cultural exchange between the United States and China has become much more common since the 1970s. Since then, large numbers of Chinese students have travelled to the United States to advance their studies (Han, Chen, & Fang, 2013), making them the largest group of international students in the United States in 2014 (Institute of International Education, 2014). And as China's population becomes more affluent, citizens have more opportunities to travel abroad and the United States, making it the second most-preferred long distance travel destination among Chinese citizens (Fuller, 2015). The U.S. government has also eased the ability to travel to the United States by lifting some of its restrictions for obtaining short-term visas for business travelers, tourists, and students. Given these events, Chinese citizens are much more likely to have direct experience with the United States and its people by travel, and consistent with other research on the role of travel in perceptions of another nation we posit that:

*H1b: Travel experience to the United States will be significantly associated with Chinese citizens' image of the United States.*

### **Foreign News in Domestic Media**

People can receive foreign news from traditional and new media channels in their home country. Because characteristics of traditional and new media are different we distinguish between the two modes and their potential influence on Chinese citizens' image of the United States.

Traditional news media in China (e.g., newspaper, and television) have changed profoundly over the last several decades (Keatley, 2003). A more market-driven media

environment has led to a vast increase in the number of media outlets and the diversification of content and formats available to audiences (Chan, 2009). However, the Chinese media environment remains one of the most restricted in the world (Freedom House, 2010). International television broadcasts like CNN or the BBC are inaccessible to most of its public (Keatley, 2003), and the country is well known for censoring potentially slanderous content, particularly during high profile events (Freedom House, 2010). Such censorship exemplifies how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views the mass media as a tool to disseminate its objectives (Chan, 2009).

Because most traditional media in China are under heavy state regulation (Chan, 2009), news coverage of the United States in traditional Chinese media is typically congruent with the CCP's ideology (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Recalling the processes of agenda-setting and framing described earlier, news stories selected by editors in state-owned media enterprises (e.g., China Central Television and *People's Daily*) likely reinforce this ideology and government policies (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). And to make the U.S.-related news relevant to its audience, journalists are likely to frame the content so it is compatible with China's sociopolitical structure. Content analyses show the Chinese press has framed controversial, U.S.-related issues to align with the Chinese government's position, often meaning the United States is portrayed negatively (Hook & Pu, 2006; Yang, 2003). The general tone of Chinese press coverage of the United States has been particularly negative when reporting on political, economic, and military issues, and other international affairs (He et al., 2012; Liu & Yang, 2015). Indeed, Chinese citizens who get more news from state-regulated traditional media sources have been found to have a more negative image of the United States in foreign affairs (Shi et al., 2011). Based on this, we posit the following:

*H2a: Exposure to news about the United States from traditional Chinese media will be significantly associated with Chinese citizens' image of the United States.*

Much like traditional media, the number and diversity of online sources available to the Chinese public has sharply increased. This includes online news organizations, search engines, blogs, citizen journalist websites, social media, and online forums. Online media have changed news production (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009) and consumption, allowing audiences to read, share, or comment on news stories on social networking sites. These changes can influence the gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and news framing processes of foreign news production (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Wall, 2005), making the content and experience of getting news online different from traditional media consumption.

China currently has the largest number of Internet users in the world (Internet World Stats, 2015), and its citizenry is one of the world's most active in online social communities (Chiu, Ip, & Silverman, 2012). China also has the largest number of mobile phone subscribers and a high usage rate of mobile text messaging (MIIT, 2016). Concurrent with the its public's uptake of new media, the Chinese government has asserted tight control and regulation (referred to as the "Great Firewall") over online content and access (Wallis, 2011) and to text and other messaging applications (Qiu, 2007).

Despite the Chinese government's efforts to prevent the Internet from becoming a breeding ground for political resistance, it is unclear whether its censorship is effective. For one, a number of technological (e.g., Virtual Private Networks) and non-technological (e.g., encoded language) methods can obfuscate the government's strategies for filtering and censoring content (Qiu, 2007; Wallis, 2011). Studies also show that Internet censors in China do not function consistently over time (Wallis, 2011). With the Chinese state's firm control of traditional media, the Internet and text messaging are regarded as alternative information sources and viable platforms for the Chinese public to access alternative information and express diverse political perspectives (He, 2008; Wallis, 2011). One experiment (Tang & Huhe, 2013) showed Chinese people exposed to alternative information about a political issue

online were less likely to hold the view that was congruent with the Chinese government. In light of this literature, we posit that:

*H2b: Exposure to news about the United States from new media will be significantly associated with Chinese citizens' image of the United States.*

According to our proposed model of national image, image of a foreign nation may result from the joint influence of exposure to foreign news content and one's pre-existing schema. As such, Chinese citizens may draw on their patriotic schema or U.S. travel experience when they encounter news content. Prior studies on national image have not examined the joint influence of these schema and foreign news exposure, and so we pose the following research questions:

*RQ1a: Does U.S.-related news exposure from traditional media and patriotism jointly influence Chinese's image of the United States?*

*RQ1b: Does U.S.-related news exposure from new media and patriotism jointly influence Chinese's image of the United States?*

*RQ2a: Does U.S.-related news exposure from traditional media and U.S. travel experience jointly influence Chinese's image of the United States?*

*RQ2b: Does U.S.-related news exposure from new media and U.S. travel experience jointly influence Chinese's image of the United States?*

### **Method**

The data in this study are a subset of a larger set of 2007 public opinion surveys examining American and Chinese attitudes toward each other, sponsored by the Committee of 100.<sup>1</sup> The surveys assessed each citizenry's perceptions about the other nation and Sino-American relations. This study relies on data from the Chinese survey, provided to the researchers by the Committee of 100. The survey was administered by face-to-face interviews conducted between August and September 2007 by the independent public opinion polling

firm Horizon Research Consultancy.<sup>2</sup> The nationally representative sample of 4,104 adults was drawn using multi-stage random sampling, and including respondents from seven metropolitan cities, seven towns, and ten villages. The margin of error was  $\pm 1.6\%$ .

The 2007 survey was selected for analysis because it was the year before the country hosted the Olympics in Beijing – the first time it hosted the world’s biggest sporting event. The Olympics brought global attention and propelled China onto the global stage. There were also several political controversies in 2007, such as U.S. politicians’ public criticism of China’s handling of the Sudan crisis (Price, 2008). Therefore, the 2007 survey data reflect this public’s view of the United States in a defining moment for modern China.

### Measures

We rely on four sets of measures in the analysis: (a) image of the United States; (b) pre-existing schema (patriotism and travel experience to the United States); (c) exposure to news about the United States from domestic media (exposure to news about the United States from Chinese traditional and new media); and (d) socio-demographic variables.

**Image of the United States.** Image of the United States involved both affective and cognitive dimensions (He et al., 2012). The affective dimension consisted of one item reflecting favorability toward the United States. It was assessed by asking respondents, “How would you describe your impression of the U.S.?” Respondents gave answers on a scale ranging from 1 (*very favorable*), to 4 (*very unfavorable*), which was reverse-coded so that higher values represent a more favorable image ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ).

The cognitive dimension of the U.S. image included three statements identified from the dataset that assessed Chinese citizens’ beliefs about U.S. policies and relations with China. Two items were measured by a single statement asking respondents to indicate their agreement along a 4-point scale (1 *strongly agree* to 4 *strongly disagree*), reverse-coded so a high value represented more agreement. These statements were: Trade with the United States

is beneficial to the Chinese economy ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) and the United States is an important partner to China in the world today ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). The third item asked, “Do you think that the U.S. media portrays an accurate picture of China,” with possible answers of *yes* (20.6%), *no* (49.1%), *don’t know* (28.8%) or *refuse to answer* (1.5%). *Refuse to answer* was excluded from the analysis. However, we included respondents who indicated *don’t know* in the analysis because this category made up a sizable number of respondents ( $n = 1,182$ ) and we considered it meaningful that respondents did not know about how U.S. media portray China. The three statements are diverse and touch on different aspects of relations between China and the United States and so we treat them as distinct measures.

**Pre-existing schema.** Pre-existing schema included patriotism and travel experience to the United States. Patriotism was measured by a single item asking the respondents to rate their level of patriotism on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 *not at all patriotic* to 5 *highly patriotic* ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). Travel experience to the United States was assessed by asking respondents to indicate if they had ever visited the country (1.6% answered *yes*).

**Exposure to news about the United States from domestic media.** U.S.-related news exposure from domestic media involved two items, one reflecting respondents’ exposure to news about the United States from Chinese traditional media and the other from Chinese new media. One item asked, “from which sources do you get much of your news about the U.S.?” followed by eight different choices of traditional media (English TV, Chinese TV, English newspaper, Chinese newspaper, English radio, Chinese radio, English news magazines, and Chinese news magazines). Respondents selected all the sources they used, which was summed into an index of exposure to U.S.-related news from Chinese traditional media ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ). The second asked respondents to select all the new media sources they used (English Internet, Chinese Internet, and text messages) for news about the United States,

which was summed into an index of exposure to U.S.-related news from Chinese new media ( $M = 0.21$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ).

**Socio-demographics.** Socio-demographic variables were also included as controls in the analysis. These included age ( $M = 38.63$ ,  $SD = 11.76$ ), highest level of education measured on an 8-point scale from *less than elementary school* to *doctoral degree* ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ , median = *high school/technical high school*), and monthly household income measured on a 19-point scale from less than RMB500 to more than RMB10,001 ( $M = \text{RMB}2,723$ ,  $SD = \text{RMB}2,536$ ). Gender (52.9% female), Communist party membership (7%), Han ethnicity (98.3%), marital status (77% married), employment type (6% civil servants, 9.9% white-collar workers, 32.9% laborers), urban residency (45.7% of sample), and coastal residency (46%) were included as dummy-coded variables in the analytic models.

### **Analytic Approach**

We use hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test the predictors of the Chinese public's image of the United States posed in our hypotheses and research questions. The socio-demographic control variables were entered in the first block, followed by respondents' source of pre-existing schema. The third block was exposure to U.S.-related news from domestic news (traditional and new media). The final block included the interaction terms testing the joint effects of the pre-existing schema and news exposure. The interaction terms were created by standardizing the variables of patriotism and traditional news media exposure and then multiplying them.

Because belief about U.S. media's portrayal of China was a nominal variable, we use multinomial logistic regression to compare the likelihood of indicating U.S. media coverage of China is "accurate" versus "inaccurate", and "don't know" versus "inaccurate". The variables were entered in blocks in the same succession as the hierarchical regression analyses.

## Results

### The Role of Pre-existing Schema

Hypothesis 1a posited a relationship between patriotism and Chinese public's image of the United States. The findings on the affective and cognitive dimension of the U.S. image provide partial support for H1a. Specifically, the hierarchical regression analysis of Chinese citizens' favorability toward the United States showed that, after controlling for socio-demographics, patriotism had a significant and negative influence ( $\beta = -0.04, p = 0.018$ ), suggesting the more patriotic, the less favorable respondents were toward the United States (see Table 1). The model predicting views about trade with the United States being beneficial to the Chinese economy revealed that, after controlling for socio-demographics, patriotism had significant, positive influence on respondents' belief,  $\beta = 0.07, p < 0.001$ . In other words, more patriotic respondents were more likely to hold the belief that trade with the United States is beneficial to the Chinese economy. The multinomial logistic regression analysis revealed patriotism had significant, albeit weak, relationship with respondents' belief about the accuracy of U.S. media portrayals of China, ( $b = -0.10, p = 0.07$ ). Specifically, for every one unit increase in patriotism, the odds that one would state U.S. media portrayals are accurate decreased by 9% (OR = 0.91,  $p = 0.07$ ) (see Table 2). Patriotism did not have significant influence on belief the U.S is an important partner to China in the world today,  $\beta = 0.01, n.s$ . Taken together, patriotism is negatively related to a favorable U.S. image (i.e., affective dimension of national image). However, the influence of patriotism differed across our outcomes measuring the cognitive dimensions of U.S. image.

H1b posited a significant relationship between travel experience and the U.S. image, which was partially supported. Specifically, after controlling for sociodemographics, U.S. travel experience had a positive association with respondents' favorability ( $\beta = 0.06, p = 0.002$ ) in that respondents who had visited the United States were more favorable toward the

United States (see Table 1). Similarly, U.S. travel experience had a positive, but weak, effect on belief the United States is an important partner to China in the world today,  $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.06$ . The multinomial logistic regression analysis revealed a strong influence of travel experience on respondents' belief about U.S. media portrayals of China (see Table 2).

Respondents who had visited the U.S. were more likely to indicate U.S. media coverage of China is accurate than inaccurate ( $b = 3.06$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). That is, those who had visited the United States were over twenty times more likely to say that U.S. media coverage of China was accurate than inaccurate (OR = 21.26,  $p = 0.001$ ). Travel experience did not have a significant influence on the respondents' belief trade with the United States is beneficial to the Chinese economy,  $\beta = 0.01$ , *n.s.* Overall, travel experience to the United States is for the most part positively related to Chinese respondents' image of the United States. Travel experience to the United States is positively related to a favorable U.S. image (i.e., affective dimension of national image). With regard to cognitive dimension of national image, travel experience to the United States has a positive relationship with beliefs about the importance of United States as the partner to China, and the perceived accuracy of U.S. media portrayal of China.

### **The Role of Foreign News Exposure from Domestic Media**

H2a hypothesized that exposure to news about the United States in traditional media would be significantly associated with the U.S. image, which was partially supported (Table 1). After controlling for demographics and pre-existing schema, respondents who reported more exposure to U.S.-related news in traditional media expressed less favorable views toward the United States ( $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). The multinomial logistic regression analysis revealed respondents who got more news about the United States from traditional media are more likely to say U.S. media coverage about China is inaccurate than accurate ( $b = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) (see Table 2). Specifically, for every one-unit increase in reported exposure to news from traditional media, the odds one would believe U.S. media portrayals are accurate

decreased by 17% (OR = 0.83,  $p = 0.003$ ). Exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media did not have significant influence on either beliefs that trade with the United States is beneficial to the Chinese economy ( $\beta = 0.03$ , *n.s.*) or the United States is an important partner to China in the world today ( $\beta = 0.02$ , *n.s.*). Overall, exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media is for the most part negatively related to Chinese respondents' image of the United States. Specifically, exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media has a negative relationship with Chinese citizens' favorability toward the United States and the perceived accuracy of U.S. media portrayal of China.

H2b posited a significant association between exposure to news about the United States from new media and the U.S. image, which was also partially supported. After controlling for demographics and audience's pre-existing schema, respondents who reported more exposure to news about the United States from new media were more favorable toward the United States ( $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.053$ ). Similarly, U.S.-related news exposure from new media showed a significant, positive influence on respondents' belief that the United States is an important partner to China,  $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . The multinomial logistic regression model indicated respondents were more likely to believe that U.S. media coverage of China is accurate as opposed to inaccurate if they reported getting more news from new media ( $b = 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). That is, for each unit increase in reported new media use, the odds of saying U.S. media coverage of China is accurate increased by 31% (OR = 1.31,  $p = 0.008$ ). U.S.-related news exposure from new media on respondents' belief that trade with the United States is beneficial was not significant ( $\beta = 0.03$ , *n.s.*). Taken together, exposure to news about the United States from new media is for the most part positively related to Chinese respondents' image of the United States. Specifically, exposure to news about the United States from new media has a positive relationship with Chinese citizens' favorability toward the United States,

the perceived accuracy of U.S. media portrayal of China, and the belief about the importance of United States as the partner to China.

### **The Interplay of Foreign News Exposure and Pre-existing Schema**

R1a posed the question of whether there was an interaction effect between patriotism and exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media. The finding showed that the interaction of patriotism and exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media had a significant influence on the belief that the United States is an important partner to China in the world today,  $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.038$ . To better understand the nature of the interaction effect, simple effect analyses were conducted to examine how U.S.-related news exposure from traditional media varied across different levels of patriotism (Hayes, 2013). Specifically, we analyzed the simple effect by examining the effect of traditional media U.S.-related news exposure on respondents' belief at one standard deviation above the mean (i.e., high patriotism) and one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., low patriotism). The results showed that, for more patriotic respondents, belief in the United States as an important partner to China in the world today increased by 0.05 units for every one-unit increase in exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $t(3284) = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.02$  (see Figure 2a). For less patriotic respondents, the effect of traditional media news exposure was not significant,  $t(3284) = -0.41$ , *n.s.*

R1b asked if there was an interaction effect between patriotism and exposure to U.S.-related news from new media. The results showed that the interaction between patriotism and exposure to U.S.-related news from new media had a significant influence on the belief that trade with the United States is beneficial to the Chinese economy,  $\beta = -0.04$ ,  $p = 0.026$ . We probed the nature of the interaction by examining how exposure to news from new media varied across the levels of high patriotism and low patriotism. The findings indicate that for less patriotic respondents, the belief that trade with the United States as beneficial to the

Chinese economy increased by 0.09 units for every one-unit increase in exposure to U.S.-related news from new media,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $t(3391) = 2.59$ ,  $p = 0.008$  (Figure 2b). However, for more patriotic respondents, the effect of new media exposure on the respondents' belief was not significant,  $t(3391) = -0.77$ , *n.s.*

R2a posed the question of whether U.S. travel experience and traditional media exposure jointly influenced the Chinese public's image of the United States. The findings indicated that the interaction between U.S. travel experience and exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media had a significant influence on the belief about U.S. media portrayal of China,  $b = -0.74$ ,  $OR = 0.48$ ,  $p = 0.08$ . We probed the nature of the interaction by examining how exposure to news from traditional media varied across the U.S. travel experience. Among respondents who did not visit the United States before, those who were exposed to U.S.-related news from traditional media were more likely to believe U.S. media coverage of China is inaccurate,  $b = -0.19$ ,  $OR = 0.83$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . That is, among respondents who had not visited the United States before, the odds of believing U.S. media portrayals as accurate decreased by 17% for every one-unit increase in exposure of U.S.-related news from traditional media. For the respondents who had visited the United States before, traditional media exposure did not have significant influence on their belief,  $b = -5.31$ ,  $OR = 0.01$ , *n.s.*

R2b asked whether travel experience and new media exposure had joint influence on the U.S. image. The results indicate a significant interaction between respondents' travel experience and exposure to news about the United States from new media on respondents' favorability toward the United States ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). We then probed the nature of this interaction effect. As depicted in Figure 3, for respondents who had visited the United States, their favorability toward the United States increased 0.14 units for one standard deviation increase in exposure to U.S.-related news from new media (simple effect = 0.14,  $p = 0.06$ ). For those who had never visited the U.S., their favorability toward the United States increased

0.03 units for one standard deviation increase in exposure to information about the United States from new media (simple effect = 0.03,  $p = 0.05$ ).

### **Discussion**

Based on our proposed model of national image, this study examines how foreign news exposure from domestic media interplays with a domestic audience's pre-existing schema to influence the public image of a foreign nation. More specifically, this study is a theory-building effort to explain how the effect of foreign news from domestic media varies and aimed to outline the conditions in which the influence of foreign news from domestic media are likely to take place. To do so, we analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of Chinese citizens. Explicating the theoretical relationships among the variables of foreign news exposure from domestic media, audience's pre-existing schema, and image of a foreign nation can provide insights for communication and international relations scholars. It can also help foreign policymakers and stakeholders interested in public diplomacy efforts understand the role of foreign news from domestic media in the process of national image formation.

Before we discuss our findings in detail, we will acknowledge some aspects of our data and analyses to consider when interpreting results. First, using data collected nearly a decade ago may be a concern. However, this study is a theory-building effort, which attempts to develop a theoretical framework that outlines the conceptual relationships of foreign news exposure from domestic media, audience's pre-existing schema, and the image of a foreign nation. Although the Chinese citizens' patterns of foreign news exposure from traditional and new media, and travel experience to the United States will change over time, the conceptual links among those variables should remain fairly stable. Therefore, criticism of data currency may be reduced to a certain extent. Second, we acknowledge there have been significant changes in Chinese society and Sino-American relations since the data were collected. For instance, the percentages of the Chinese population with Internet access, smart phones, and

use of social media/micro-blogging have increased drastically (Internet World Stats, 2015), as has the number of Chinese traveling to the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). These changes warrant examining whether these effects have persisted or even increased over time. Third, our data are from a cross-sectional survey, which restricts establishing causality between the variables. However, we attempted to control the influence of other confounding factors such as socio-demographics. Finally, because our study relies on secondary data analysis, we were constrained by how to measure our concepts of interest. For example, we had to rely on a single-item indicator of patriotism, which made it difficult to differentiate between patriotism and nationalism. Our measure of U.S. image was also restrictive. Sinkkonen (2013), for example, argues that image should encompass a greater number of domains to measure this concept of national image. Future research may incorporate Chinese citizens' beliefs and feelings about the United States across social, cultural, military, and historic domains. It would also be helpful to capture the respondents' exposure to particular news programs or sources and their knowledge and interest in Sino-American relations and policies. Finally, our proposed model of national image offers plausible cognitive mechanisms explaining the effects of foreign news from domestic media on national image. Its intent was not to examine gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and news framing processes, though we draw on them to explain the variations in the effect of foreign news from domestic media in our proposed model based on the literature. Future research can examine these processes in the context of foreign news more directly.

Despite these limitations, this study provides important theoretical and practical contributions. Perhaps the most important findings in this study are the conditional effects of foreign news from domestic media on national image. That is, the effect of foreign news from domestic media takes place only in some respondents according to their pre-existing schema. This includes the conditional effect of traditional media exposure. Our data indicate the more

patriotic Chinese citizens are and the more they are exposed to the U.S.-related news from traditional media, the more likely they hold the belief the United States is an important partner to China. However, this effect was not significant for those who are less patriotic.

Furthermore, our findings reveal the main effect of foreign news from domestic media is qualified by audience's pre-existing schema. For instance, among our respondents reporting more exposure to foreign news from new media, if they had traveled to the United States, their favorability toward the country increased at a higher rate than that of those who had not traveled there (see Figure 3). The result of the belief about U.S. media portrayal of China also shows that, of those who had not traveled to the United States, the more they traveled to the United States, exposure to U.S.-related news from traditional media was positively related to the belief that U.S. media coverage of China as inaccurate. However, the effect of foreign news from traditional media is not significant for those who had visited the United States.

In short, these conditional and qualifying effects suggest that the effect of foreign news from domestic media on national image varies based on Chinese citizens' schema. To form an image of the United States, Chinese citizens are likely to draw on their patriotism and U.S. travel experience to process and interpret content from foreign news. In other words, the effect of exposure to foreign news on a public's image of a nation is dependent on their pre-existing schema, providing empirical support for our proposed model of national image.

The findings related to patriotism and image of the United States is consistent with the literature. Patriotism led these respondents to perceive the image of the United States in terms of China's interests. Specifically, more patriotic respondents are more likely to hold more positive beliefs regarding the United States based on China's economic interests, such as seeing trade with the United States as beneficial to their economy). On the contrary, more patriotic respondents hold a more negative belief in that they feel less favorably toward the U.S. and are more likely to say its media portrayals of China are inaccurate.

The findings of travel experience are also consistent with the literature. Chinese citizens who have travelled to the United States have had first-hand experience with the country, and are more likely to believe its media accurately portray China, say it is an important partner to China, and be more favorable to the United States. However, the travel experience does not significantly influence the respondents' economic beliefs about the United States. We speculate that travel experience may not afford enough insight into the economic aspects of national image.

This study shows that the influence of foreign news from traditional media and new media in China are different. Chinese citizens reporting more exposure to foreign news from traditional media are more likely to have a more negative view of the United States. As traditional media sources in China are under stricter control and functions as the Party's apparatus, U.S.-related issues are likely to be selected by news editors and reporters and the selected issues on the newspaper and TV news are likely to be framed more congenial to the Chinese government foreign issue position. Therefore, Chinese people with higher exposure to foreign news from traditional media are likely to hold a more negative U.S. image, such as their belief that U.S. media portrayals of China are inaccurate and the feeling unfavorably toward the United States. In contrast, Chinese citizens reporting more exposure to news from new media are more likely to have a positive U.S. image. Although Chinese government has imposed censorship on Internet content, Chinese people have a relatively greater chance of encountering more diverse news from a different types of sources online. Our findings show that Chinese people with higher exposure to foreign news from new media are likely to hold a more positive U.S. image based on their beliefs that the United States is an important partner to China, U.S. media portrays China accurately, and they also express a more favorable attitude toward the United States.

The findings of this study also show that the concept of national image is multi-dimensional. The data indicate that pre-existing schema and foreign news have different influences on the affective and cognitive dimensions of national image. For example, foreign news exposure from traditional and new media appears to significantly influence favorability toward the United States, but do not significantly influence some beliefs related to the cognitive dimension of U.S. image (see Table 1). Travel experience to the United States does not have a significant impact on the beliefs related to the economic aspect of the United States.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, our findings also provide some practical implications to cultivate a more positive image of the United States in China. Our data suggest that U.S. travel experience exerts a positive influence on Chinese citizens' image of the United States and moderates the influence of traditional media exposure (e.g., perceptions of U.S. media portrayals). Therefore, the U.S. government can promote opportunities for Chinese citizens to travel to the United States. The U.S.'s national image may also benefit from broadening its cultural and educational exchange programs. For instance, the increase in the number of educational exchange by the Fulbright program (U.S. Embassy, 2011), and the U.S. government has eased the ability to travel to the United States by lifting some of its restrictions for obtaining short-term visas for Chinese business travelers and tourists. These public diplomacy initiatives potentially cultivate a more positive image of the United States in China. Furthermore, our findings show that foreign news from new media in China is likely to have a more positive influence on Chinese citizens' image of the United States. More recently, the U.S. government has recognized the value of the Internet as an instrument for public diplomacy in China. The U.S. Embassy in China has set up Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo (microblogging) sites and each has several hundred thousand subscribers. In addition, during Obama's 2009 visit to China, the U.S. State Department held the first press briefings with

prominent Chinese bloggers (The Wall Street Journal, 2009). The U.S. Embassy also held a roundtable with Chinese bloggers prior to President Hu's 2011 visit to the United States (U.S. Embassy, 2011). These efforts potentially cultivate more diverse information and more positive views about the United States.

This study provides some suggestions for subsequent research. Because our findings show that pre-existing schema and foreign news have different influence on the dimensions of national image and various aspects of a foreign nation, future research should include multiple dimensions and aspects when measuring the concept of national image in order to have a more nuance understanding of the image of a foreign nation.

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<sup>1</sup>The Committee of 100 (C-100) is a national non-partisan, non-profit membership organization comprised of Chinese American leaders in a broad range of professions, with the missions (1) to encourage constructive relations between the peoples of the United States and Greater China, and (2) to encourage Chinese Americans for greater inclusion in the American society.

<sup>2</sup>Horizon Research Consultancy Group has become a leading research firm in China. It is a representative of ESOMAR and AMCF (Association of Management Consulting Firms) in China.

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Chinese Public's Image of the United States.

Variables	Affective dimension	Cognitive dimension	
	Favorability toward the U.S. ( $n = 3, 339$ )	Trade with the U.S. is Beneficial to the Chinese Economy ( $n = 3, 395$ )	The U.S. is an important partner to China in the world today ( $n = 3, 290$ )
<b>Socio-demographics<sup>a</sup></b>			
Age	-.03	-.02	-.02
Educational level	.00	.05*	.05*
Household income	.08***	.07**	.09***
Female	.04*	-.02	.00
Communist party member	-.02	-.00	.00
Han ethnicity	.03	.00	.00
Married	.00	-.03	-.03
Civil servant	-.02	.01	.02
White-collar worker	-.02	.02	-.01
Farmer	-.01	.16***	.17***
Urban resident	.09***	.13***	.29***
Coastal area resident	.04*	.04**	-.07**
<i>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	2.90***	3.30***	9.50***
<b>Pre-existing Schema</b>			
Patriotism	-.04*	.07***	.01
Travel to the U.S.	.06**	.01	.03 <sup>#</sup>
<i>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	.05***	.04*	.01
<b>Exposure to News about the U.S. from Domestic Media</b>			
from traditional media	-.05*	.03	.02
from new media	.04*	.03	.06**
<i>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	.03*	.01 <sup>#</sup>	.04*
<b>Interactions</b>			
Patriotism x Traditional media exposure	-.00	-.01	.04*
Patriotism x New media exposure	.03	-.04*	.00
Travel x Traditional media exposure	.03	.03	.03
Travel x New media exposure	.05*	.03	.02
<i>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	.02	.02 <sup>#</sup>	.02 <sup>#</sup>
<b>Total R<sup>2</sup> (%)</b>	<b>3.80</b>	<b>4.20</b>	<b>10.20</b>

Notes. <sup>#</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . <sup>#</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Missing values were deleted in a listwise manner. <sup>a</sup> Although the percentages of respondents in the categories of community party member ( $n = 286$ , 7%), civil servant ( $n = 66$ , 1.6%), white-collar worker ( $n = 406$ , 9.9%) and non-Han ethnicity ( $n = 66$ , 1.6%) were small, these variables are indicators of persisting structural social inequality, which might influence individual opportunities to travel abroad, gain exposure to news media, and level of patriotism (Sinkkonen, 2013). Therefore, we included these categories for stringent statistical control.

Table 2. Cognitive Component of Chinese Public's Image of the United States: Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Chinese Public's Belief about U.S. Media's Portrayal of China.

Variables	Accurate <sup>a</sup> vs. Inaccurate <sup>a</sup>		Don't know <sup>a</sup> vs. Inaccurate <sup>a</sup>	
	B	Relative risk ratio	B	Relative risk ratio
<b>Socio-demographics</b>				
Age	.00	1.00	.01	1.00
Educational level	-.11*	.89*	-.19***	.83***
Household income	.00	1.00	.00	1.00
Female	.08	1.08	.13	1.13
Communist party member	.00	1.00	.00	1.00
Han ethnicity	.60	1.80	.36	1.44
Married	-.30*	.74	-.35**	.71**
Civil servant	-.08	.92	.06	1.07
White-collar worker	-.27*	.76*	-.26 <sup>#</sup>	.77 <sup>#</sup>
Farmer	-1.15***	.32***	-.18	.83
Urban resident	.05	1.05*	-.09	.92
Coastal area resident	.44***	1.55***	-.11	.90
<b>Pre-existing Schema</b>				
Patriotism	-.10 <sup>#</sup>	.91 <sup>#</sup>	-.25***	.78***
Travel to the U.S.	3.06**	21.26**	.55	1.74
<b>Exposure to News about the U.S. from Domestic Media</b>				
from traditional media	-.18**	.83**	-.12 <sup>#</sup>	.89 <sup>#</sup>
from new media	.27*	1.31*	-.10	.91
<b>Interactions</b>				
Patriotism x Traditional media exposure	-.07	.93	.10	1.01
Patriotism x New media exposure	.06	1.06	.06	1.06
Travel x Traditional media exposure	-.74 <sup>#</sup>	.48 <sup>#</sup>	-.14	.87
Travel x New media exposure	-.09	.92	-.79	.46

Note.  $N = 3,416$ , #  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients and odds ratio corresponding to the coefficients. Missing values were deleted in a listwise manner. <sup>a</sup>Sample sizes: inaccurate portrayal of China ( $n = 2,014, 49.8\%$ ), accurate portrayal of China ( $n = 847, 21.0\%$ ), don't know ( $n = 1,182, 29.2\%$ ).

Figure 1. A Model of National Image

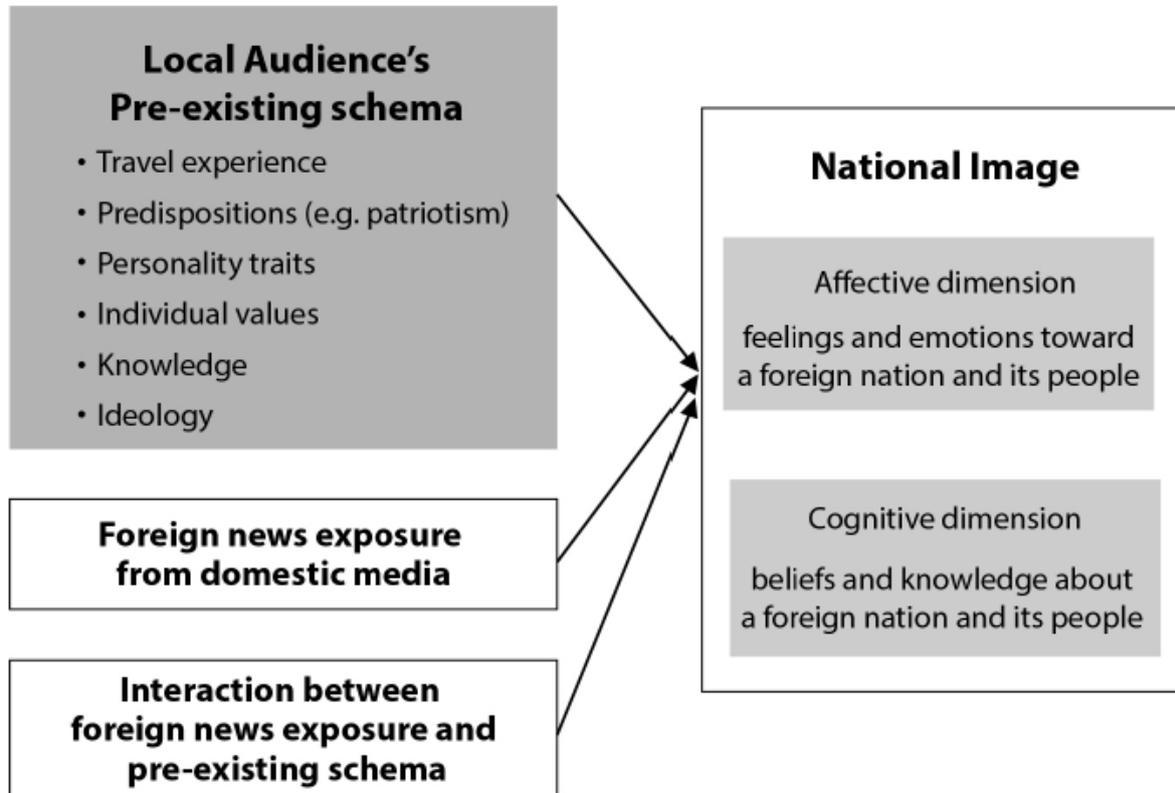


Figure 2a. Interaction effect between patriotism and news exposure on the U.S. from traditional media on the belief that the U.S. is an important partner to China in the world today.

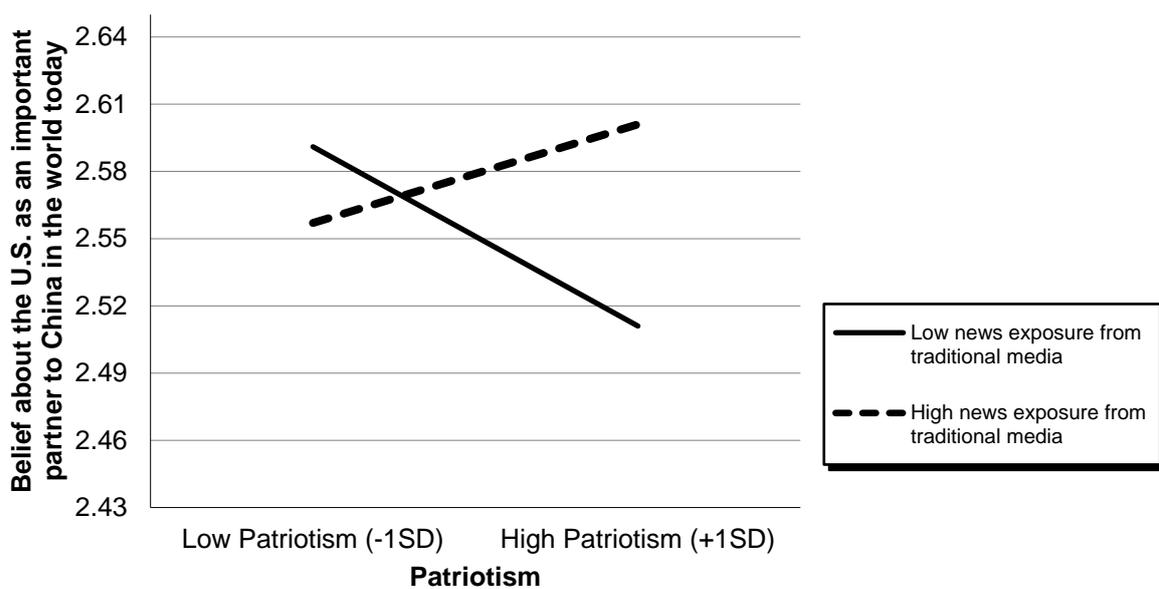


Figure 2b. Interaction effect between patriotism and news exposure on the U.S. from new media on the belief about trade with the U.S. as beneficial to the Chinese economy.

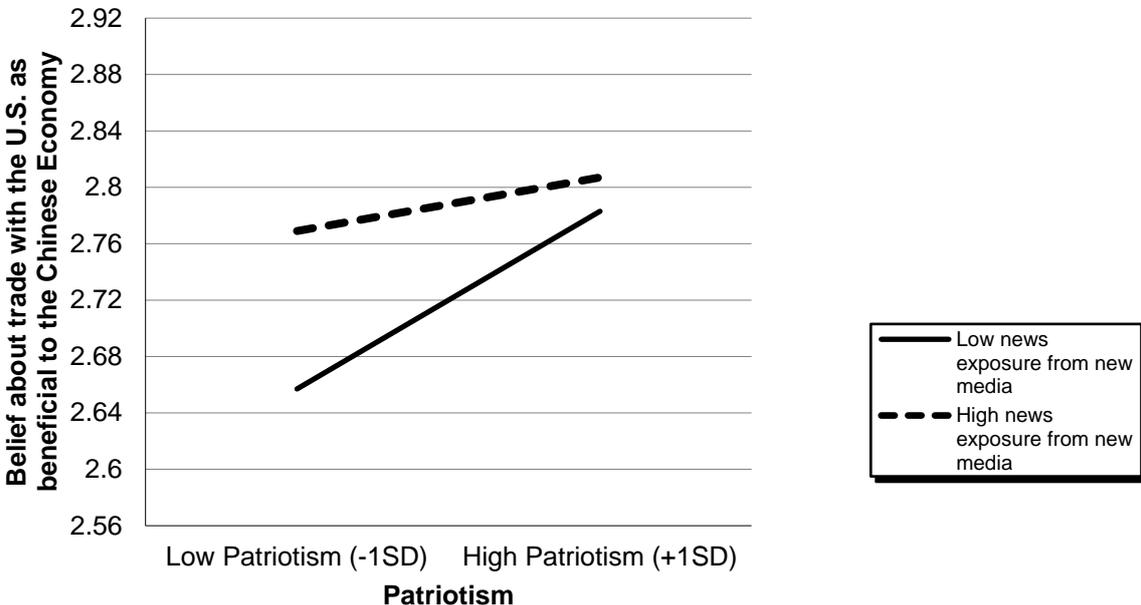


Figure 3. Interaction effect between travel experience and news exposure on the U.S. from new media on favorable attitude toward the United States.

