

## Chinese Perceptions of Threats from the United States and Japan

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*People's threat perceptions play a role in influencing foreign policies towards perceived adversary countries. Earlier research has identified multiple components shaping mass-level threat perceptions including military power, adversary country's perceived intentions, and national identities. On the individual level, education, use of media, and interest in politics have been shown to influence threat perceptions. However, most studies on perceptions of security threats fail to include both contextual and individual-level explanatory factors and to consider that different national threats may be constructed differently. This research bridges formation of threat perceptions on the individual level to wider societal processes and provides an empirical perspective to understanding threat perceptions among the educated section of the Chinese population. To analyze threat perceptions, students from leading Chinese universities ( $N = 771$ ) took part in a survey in the autumn of 2011 and spring of 2012. Respondents who followed conventional media were more likely to perceive both the United States and Japan as threatening, and the effect of media consumption was particularly strong with regards to perceived threat from Japan. In addition, each threat perception was significantly associated with threat-specific explanatory factors. Potential explanatory factors of threat perceptions were explored with linear regression models.*

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**KEY WORDS:** China, threat perceptions, media consumption, United States, Japan, national identity

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Mass perceptions of threat can significantly influence a country's foreign policy. A high degree of perceived security threat can give support to "hard-line" policies against a perceived enemy as external threat increases ingroup cohesion and evokes attitudes backing aggressive responses towards outgroups (Brewer, 1999; Cottam & Cottam, 2001; Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005; Moskalenko, McCauley, & Rozin, 2006). Second, a high degree of perceived security threat helps to mobilize people in dealing with the perceived threat (Chen, 2001; Cohen, 1978; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990).

Perceived security threats have been studied both from International Relations (IR) as well as psychological perspectives, which tend to emphasize different levels of analysis: IR research focuses on international systemic factors and states whereas psychology scrutinizes the individual. Realist theorists in IR (Kennedy, 1987; Waltz, 1979) and realist conflict theorists in social psychology (Sherif, 1966) relate perceptions of security threats to power asymmetries. In the 1980s, scholars in IR began increasingly looking at intention as a source of threat, which helped to understand psychological components of threat perceptions in addition to material elements (Stein, 2013). According

to Walt's (1987, p. 22) influential definition, military threat is a function of four elements: military power, offensive capability, geographical proximity, and aggressive intentions.

In the study of threat perceptions, perceived security threat is often defined as consisting both of elements of capability and intention to harm (Chen, 2001; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990; Jervis, 1976; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1992). Over the years, IR approaches highlighting nonmaterial factors in threat formation have gained ground. In the 1990s, social constructivists emphasized that identities influence threat perceptions: A shared identity or similarity can reduce or eliminate threat perceptions (Wendt, 1999). The role of identities has later been proven empirically (Gries, Zhang, Crowson, & Cai, 2011; Rousseau, 2006). The political nature of security and threats got attention among scholars who formed securitization theory. They argued that classifying something as a threat to national security is a political choice rather than an objective fact, highlighting the possibility of politically manipulating security measures. Using the word "security" creates an action priority and calls for exceptional measures to prevent undesirable outcomes (Buzan, 1983; Buzan, Weaver, & Wilde, 1998).

The ways in which people respond to dominant definitions of threats in national discourses depend on various factors. It has been established that level of education (Gries & Sanders, 2015) and media use (Chen, 2001; Gries & Sanders, 2015; Ridout, Grosse, & Appleton, 2008) influence the formation of threat perceptions at the individual level. More generally, psychological studies on decision-making have challenged the rational actor model, which used to be the dominant way to present human behavior in most of IR. The cognitive approach in psychology acknowledges that the world is complex, but people's mental capacities are limited in meeting standards of ideal rationality. Thus, people adopt various cognitive shortcuts or heuristics, which, while essential, often lead to false conclusions (Levy, 2013; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Uncovering the "bounded rationality" of human thinking was important in building a more accurate picture of cognitive processes driving human behavior (Chong, 2013). Acknowledging the limits of cognitive processing enable a more nuanced understanding of security dynamics by improving knowledge on the individuals who form threat perceptions.

As described above, previous research has identified multiple components shaping perceptions of security threats on individual and collective levels. Some of the complexities involved in the process of forming threat perceptions have been operationalized in research frameworks. Garcia-Retamero, Müller, and Rousseau (2012) showed that threat perceptions are affected by material factors and identities simultaneously. Some studies have also recognized that understanding the sources of anti-outgroup perceptions necessitates combining both contextual and individual-level explanatory characteristics because people react to societal input differently (Pettigrew, 2006; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010; Stein, 2013). Gries and Sanders (2015) studied the interaction of personal and situational variables to demonstrate that personal interest plays a role in the way news-media content influences Chinese respondents' threat perceptions of the United States. Finally, there is some research comparing threat perceptions of different foreign countries. Chen's (2001) research provides a rare analysis of factors influencing Chinese threat perceptions of both the United States and Japan. However, none of the studies mentioned includes personal and situational variables in the context of two different national threats. This study has this combination of elements, to investigate whether personal and situational factors interact differently regarding different national threats.

There are also empirical imbalances to which this research aims to contribute. Mainstream IR literature is abundant in texts describing various kinds of threats China is perceived to pose to other countries ranging from growing military power and lack of democracy to economic development (Huntington, 1996; Mearsheimer, 2006, 2010; Yee & Storey, 2002). However, Chinese threat perceptions of other countries have been analyzed much less. Yet, threat perceptions influence political processes in authoritarian countries even without general elections. The CCP must take public opinion into account in its policymaking due to legitimacy needs. Especially issues related to Japan evoke a strong response from the Chinese public (He, 2009; Jakobson & Knox, 2010; Reilly, 2012).

Even before the strengthened U.S.-Japan military alliance in 2015 and changes Donald Trump's presidency has brought for the Asian security architecture, it seemed clear to most Chinese that the United States and Japan were the two most threatening countries to China.

This article provides a snapshot of how elite university students gauge military threat from the United States and Japan. Chinese elite university students form an interesting group to analyze because they have been subject to patriotic education, and the state has created an effective system for controlling students (Wang, 2012; Yan, 2014). On the other hand, their educational background has provided them with more information on many issues in comparison to the less educated parts of the population. As the survey analyzed in this article was collected in 2011–12, just before Xi Jinping's ascent to power, it can provide a point of comparison for subsequent studies. There is reason to assume that rivalry perceptions in China may have become more common after 2012 due to the tense situation in the South China Sea and Korean Peninsula in 2017 followed by a trade war with the United States in 2018.

### Interpretive Aspects of Threats

This research builds its understanding of perceived security threats on answering two interlinked questions: What constitutes a threat and which factors increase the likelihood of perceiving something as a threat? In this research, external security threat is defined as perceived capacity and intention to harm China.

This article contributes to our understanding of the interrelationships between psychological and political processes in the following ways. First, the theoretical framework and associated methodology combine contextual and individual-level factors and join formation of threat perceptions on the individual level to wider societal and political processes. Second, by making visible some of the ways in which cognitive processes matter in forming threat perceptions, this article helps to complement the adversary-focused research on threats. Acknowledging what happens at the individual level highlights the need to include ideational factors in the analysis of threats. Because both material and ideational elements shape perceptions of security threats, these threats should not therefore be treated as objective sets of conditions. Rather, perceiving necessarily entails interpretation.

Perceptions of national threats observed at the individual level are constructed through interaction of elements on the individual, societal, and international levels. In this interaction of psychological and political processes, individual-level factors, such as style of information processing and knowledge, interact with the surrounding society and international components resulting in threat perceptions. The social level mediates between the individual and national/international levels. People's inherent "groupness" entails natural differentiation between ingroups and outgroups, which can also be exploited for political purposes. Political systems and their leaders are well aware that perceived common threat from outgroups increases ingroup cohesion and loyalty (Brewer, 1999). These themes are discussed in more detail below. Figure 1 summarizes material and ideational elements on both foreign and domestic levels to form a comprehensive picture of factors contributing to formation of threat perceptions.

#### *Material Factors*

Material factors provide the basis for mass-scale threat perceptions. In analyzing Chinese threat perceptions of the United States and Japan, military power dynamics in China's geographical proximity are important to consider. The United States remains the world's most capable military power. Despite China's recent military modernization and growing defense budgets, it still lags far behind the United States in defense spending (SIPRI, 2018). The U.S. military presence in Asia remains significant, and it maintains military bases in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.


	MATERIAL	IDEATIONAL
FOREIGN	Adversary country's - Military power - Offensive capability - Geographical proximity	Adversary country's aggressive intentions
DOMESTIC	Domestic capacity to counter external threats	 - Shared identity and values - Media environment - Responsiveness to external influences at the individual level

Figure 1. Factors contributing to formation of threat perceptions on different levels of analysis.

Japan’s military is technologically advanced, but from China’s perspective, Japan is mainly threatening due to its military alliance with the United States and historical aggression against China, which raises doubts about Japan’s future intentions (Sinkkonen, 2019). Japan and the United States have deepened their security alliance since the mid-1990s and Japan has gradually taken more responsibility for its own defense (Christensen, 1999).

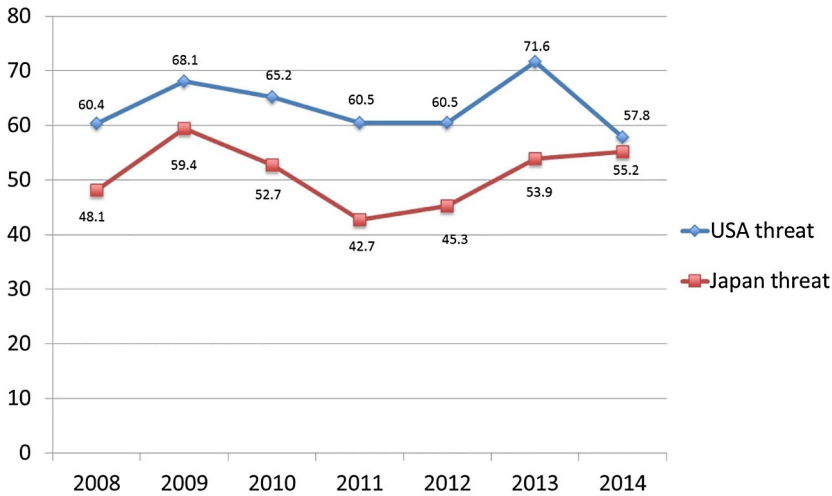
What is more, Japan and China have a territorial dispute regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, and the situation was acute at the time survey material for this study was collected. A deepening downward spiral in Sino-Japanese relations started in 2010 when Japan arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing boat, which had collided with Japanese Coast Guard vessels. This resulted in a direct official confrontation for the first time (Nakano, 2016). In 2012, the Japanese government decided to buy the islands to prevent Tokyo’s right-wing Governor, Shintaro Ishihara, from doing the same.

According to polls, the United States and Japan are viewed as threats to China. Based on results from a dataset collected in Beijing in 1999, Chen (2001) found that an overwhelming majority of respondents considered the United States and Japan as threats to China in terms of both intention and capability. More recently, U.S.-China Security Perceptions Survey (*N* = 2597) found that 63% of respondents believed the United States poses the greatest threat to China, and Japan was the second most threatening country. The more educated respondents were more likely to view the United States as the biggest threat (Gries & Sanders, 2015). In all the Beijing-Tokyo forum (2017) polls conducted between 2008 and 2016, Japan and the United States were perceived as more threatening compared to any other country. Trends in Chinese threat perceptions in the Beijing-Tokyo forum’s polls are presented in Figure 2.<sup>1</sup>

### *Identity and Core Values*

While there may be yardsticks to evaluate offensive capabilities, assessment of “aggressive intentions” is less straightforward. The more similar a country is to one’s own, the less threatening people feel it is. According to Rousseau (2006), a sense of shared identity is negatively correlated with threat perception. Identity conditions threat perceptions so strongly that material balance of power calculations become less relevant. On the other hand, people who attach to the nation more deeply

<sup>1</sup>Unfortunately, the question wording was changed in 2015 making it incomparable with earlier samples, which is why results after 2015 are left out of this figure.



**Figure 2.** Chinese perceptions of military threat from the United States and Japan in the Beijing-Tokyo forum polls. Figures are percentages of respondents who feel that the United States and Japan pose military threats to China. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

tend to feel threats more intensely and hate enemies more than people who attach to the nation less strongly (Cottam & Cottam, 2001; Herrmann, Isernia, & Segatti, 2009).

Identities can be operationalized via core values linked with particular identities. Social psychological theories about values argue that core values are important determinants of subsequent political orientations and behavior (Feldman, 2003). They also theorize that values are organized as value structures based on the individual’s salience of values (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). In the context of understanding links between values and foreign policy attitudes, Hurwitz’s and Peffley’s (1987) hierarchical model of foreign policy belief systems shows that general foreign policy core values, such as nationalism, constrain more general foreign policy beliefs such as postures and images of other nations. These images in turn shape attitudes toward specific foreign policies. Thus, core values can be assumed to be linked with threat perceptions.

Ways to define and study core values, such as nationalism and patriotism, are subject to continuous debate. Scholars such as Connor (1994) have insisted on treating nationalism and patriotism strictly as separate concepts, but others, such as Smith (2009), hold that the concepts have significant overlap. Others, like Billig (1995), deny that nationalism and patriotism can be treated as separate concepts. Nationalism and patriotism can take a wide variety of forms and evolve over time (Delanty & Kumar, 2006; Gustafsson, 2016). In part, degree of fluidity allowed for definitions depends on research philosophy and associated methods. In 1989, Kosterman and Feshbach published one of the first widely cited pieces of research analyzing patriotism and nationalism empirically with survey material. Their conclusion, based on principal factor analysis, was that patriotism and nationalism can be regarded as empirically distinct.

The Chinese government (2006) regards patriotism as a civic virtue, although their definition of it would match more with the nationalism scale than the patriotism scale used in this study. In 2006, patriotism was defined as one of the core values of the so-called socialist core values system, and its importance has been emphasized regularly (Hu, 2012; see Gustafsson, 2016 for a discussion of the Chinese government’s efforts to define patriotism). Gries et al. (2011) and Sinkkonen (2013) have studied nationalism and patriotism and their links to other attitudes in the context of Chinese core values. Both studies base their measurements of patriotism and nationalism on scales Kosterman and Feshbach (1989) developed. Kosterman and Feshbach find that “patriotism” and “nationalism”

can be regarded as empirically distinct. They define “patriotism” as feelings of attachment to one’s country and “nationalism” as the view that one’s country is superior and should be dominant.

Gries et al. (2011) and Sinkkonen (2013) show that unlike in some other countries, nationalism and patriotism are distinct constructs in Chinese student samples. In addition, nationalism is more strongly related to foreign policy preferences in comparison to patriotism. Gries et al. also identified a positive correlation between nationalism and military threat in their structural equation model indicating that respondents who received high scores on the nationalism scale were more likely to view the United States as threatening. Research by Shi, Lu, and Aldrich (2011) also supports the above-mentioned findings. In their study, a nationalistic orientation was significantly affiliated with negative evaluations of American policies toward China.

Research shows that nationalist views are common in China. Many Chinese feel that especially after the 2008 global financial crisis, China has ascended to be a first-class power in the world and should be treated as such (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012). Chinese citizens rank higher on nationalism scales compared with respondents from other countries (Tang & Darr, 2012). Nationalistic citizens tend to picture a more prominent stance for China, which also increases the likelihood of conflicts with its adversaries and consequently the feeling of being threatened by the United States and Japan.

Previous research shows a link between core values, such as nationalism, and foreign policy attitudes. It is therefore proposed that:

*H1:* The more nationalist respondents are, the more likely they are to view the United States and Japan as threats to China.

### *Media Consumption and Interest in Politics*

As attitude formation is a complex process, material factors, social identities, and values are not the only factors that influence issue specific attitudes, such as threat perceptions. In addition to the above, characteristics of the domestic context, such as the media environment, shape threat perceptions.

The media provides a channel for the public to interpret international events, but it also directs people’s attention and frames what to think about. Research shows that people are more reactive and attentive to negative than positive news. Consequently, news media around the world tends to suffer from negativity bias (Soroka & McAdams, 2015), which is not without consequences with regard to people’s thinking. Psychological studies have shown that people are not good at assessing probabilities intuitively and tend to apply availability heuristics when estimating the likelihood of events. In other words, people will try to recall examples of the event and if such examples come to mind easily, they tend to estimate the likelihood of the event higher (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Negativity bias and availability heuristics apply also to threat perceptions. Security policies conducted by adversary countries are sometimes reported disproportionately painting an inaccurate picture of various national threats. Ridout, Grosse, and Appleton (2008) show that media exposure heightens perceptions of threats of economic crisis, major war, weapons of mass destruction, global warming, population growth, and religious fanaticism. Reilly (2016) conducted a survey experiment on university students using threatening media coverage of U.S.-China and Japan-China relations as treatments. Students exposed to the “national threat” media treatments were significantly more authoritarian and nationalist in their responses to subsequent survey questions than students not exposed to these treatments.

Chinese media mostly portrays the United States and Japan if not as actual threats, at least as potential threats to China (Brady, 2008; Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2011). Despite top-down control, the Chinese media landscape has been shaped by marketization leading to increased numbers of negative stories on the United States and Japan, as these stories attract consumers and increase sales.

Regarding all media types, it has been established that the tone of reporting on the United States and Japan has turned more negative (Stockmann, 2011). In 2011, newspaper editors reported that international news was very popular among readers and only second to sports, according to their market research. *Global Times*, which has been criticized of promoting xenophobic nationalism, was one of the most profitable publications in China (Shirk, 2011). Even the Party papers are nowadays dependent on sales (Hao, 2013; Stockmann, 2011).

In addition to news media, entertainment transmits negative stereotypes. Television is used for articulating a Chinese national identity and promoting Chinese nationalism as an ideology (Song, 2015). Negative content on Japan and the Japanese are ubiquitous in Chinese TV dramas. In 2012 alone, State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television approved 69 anti-Japanese television series and about 100 films for production (Lague & Lee, 2013). In comparison, outright negative and threatening depictions of Americans are much less prevalent in Chinese entertainment television even though they are common in news media.

In a context where media coverage on the United States and Japan is mostly negative, we can expect an increase in negative views on these countries among those who follow the media. Thus, it is proposed that:

*H2: Those who follow “mainstream” media such as television, the *People’s Daily*, or Party publications are more likely to view the United States and Japan as threats.*

However, regardless of what the media reports and how it does it, threat perceptions are affected by the way individuals gather and evaluate information, that is, individuals’ issue attentiveness and responsiveness to external influences. According to the exposure-acceptance model, there is a curvilinear relation between attentiveness and persuasion power of the message transmitted, which means in practice that well-informed people are hard to persuade because they have strong prior views on issues and better ability to critically evaluate external messages. Poorly aware citizens for their part are hard to persuade because they do not pay attention to external messages such as the media. Thus, most likely to be persuaded are people who have some prior knowledge on the issue area in question, but whose opinions have some flexibility (Converse, 1962; Zaller, 1992). Often level of awareness can be linked with level of education (Kennedy, 2009; McGuire, 1968).

The exposure-acceptance model was first developed in the Western political context, but it has later been tested in authoritarian regimes (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). Using the World Values Survey from the year 2000, Kennedy (2009) applied the exposure-acceptance model to China and demonstrated that well-educated people in China are harder to influence than other groups.

Even though the highly educated tend to be less influenced by external messages, there is still variance within this group. Based on the U.S.-China Security Perception Survey, Gries and Sanders (2015) discovered that those who were highly interested in international affairs and followed the media a lot tended to perceive the United States as more threatening than others. These respondents were also more highly educated than other respondents. In contrast, respondents with low interest in international affairs saw the United States as less threatening the more news they followed, because they became more familiar with, and thus more trusting of, the countries they heard more about—without paying too much attention to the possibly negative content of the news. Thus, Gries and Sanders argue that media consumption is defined by interest in politics, and they form separate factors.

This sample presents a hard case for the finding that interest in politics defines effects of media consumption, as it is comprised of the highly educated only. There is still likely to be variance among students’ interest in politics. It is proposed that:

*H3: Those who are interested in politics are more likely to view the United States and Japan as threats.*

## Methods

### *Sample*

To find out student views on security threats, the corresponding author conducted a survey ( $N = 771$ ) in Shanghai Jiaotong University, Fudan University, Nanjing University and Zhejiang University in November and December 2011, and in Renmin University of China, Peking University, and Tsinghua University in March 2012. Except for Renmin University of China, these universities belong to the C9 league (*jiuxiao lianmeng*, 九校联盟) of Chinese top universities. Other scholars have selected these same universities as sampling sites for similar reasons (Chen, 2011; Zhao, 2003). As the samples were taken from elite universities, the results cannot be directly generalized to all Chinese students, not to mention the general population compared to which the participants were much more educated and younger. However, this survey gives us information on the views of China's future elite and enables us to study the relationships between variables, which can later be tested with other types of samples.

The questionnaire used in the research was a modified version of the ISSP (International Social Survey Program) National Identity II questionnaire, which is an international standardized questionnaire used in 34 countries in 2003. For the analysis of threat perceptions, the questionnaire was changed to include elements from questionnaires used by Gries et al. (2011) and Fairbrother (2008). Owing to the political sensitivity of the research topic, this survey was conducted as a convenience sample in the university lecture halls used for studying when no teaching is going on.<sup>2</sup> The lecture halls were selected based on their location on campus to get as representative a sample of students as possible. Participants did not receive any financial compensation for their participation. No faculty members were present during sampling giving respondents a degree of privacy in answering the questionnaire and ensuring their anonymity. Unlike face-to-face probability samples conducted in China, self-filled questionnaires may decrease respondents' feeling of having to conform to social norms or hide their political views, which may increase data quality. According to Gries and Sanders (2015), many surveys on Chinese views of political issues suffer from compliance due to the face-to-face interviewing method.

### *Sample Characteristics*

Response rate of the sample was approximately 93%, and we obtained 771 valid responses. The participants' gender ratio was approximately 56–44 (416 men and 325 women), 14% were from Fudan University ( $N = 94$ ), 14% from Shanghai Jiaotong University ( $N = 94$ ), 15% from Nanjing University ( $N = 104$ ), 21% from Zhejiang University ( $N = 142$ ), 8% were from Tsinghua University ( $N = 76$ ), 11% from Peking University ( $N = 76$ ), 9% from Renmin University of China ( $N = 63$ ), and 8% from other universities ( $N = 51$ ).<sup>3</sup> Twelve percent of respondents refused to report their home institution ( $N = 96$ ). The respondents were in average 21 years old (ranging from 17 to 34 years), 182 (25%) of them were members of the CCP or probationary members, 205 (28%) had applied or were planning to apply for the membership, and 347 (47%) were not members. Most students were studying engineering ( $N = 140$ , 19%) or economics ( $N = 101$ , 14%). Of the participants, 131 (18%) had grown up in the countryside, 306 (42%) in a town or small city, 150 in a medium-sized city (20%), and the rest ( $N = 151$ , 21%) had had an urban upbringing. Two hundred and sixty-nine (37%)

<sup>2</sup>Almost all Chinese university students live in the campus area in dormitories, where four to eight people generally share a room. This makes it hard to study in the dormitory, so most students study in the empty lecture halls between lectures.

<sup>3</sup>These students from other universities happened to be at one of the three selected universities when the sampling was conducted.



reported that their father had a university education and 212 (29%) that their mother had a university education. Respondents classified their own social status on average 5.7 on a 10-point scale (from 10 low to 1 high). Their ethnic background was most often Han Chinese ( $N = 695$ , 93%), whereas 48 respondents (7%) classified themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority. The general sample characteristics as well as variables relevant for the analysis of threat perceptions presented below are summarized in Table 1.

### *Measures*

#### *Threat Perceptions*

Perceptions of threat from the United States and Japan were measured with three and two items, respectively. Participants responded to these items on a 5-point Likert scale from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Hurwitz and Peffley (1990), Peffley and Hurwitz (1992), and Chen (2001) have used similar statements to measure threat perceptions. The number after each statement indicates its place in the questionnaire. Chinese versions of the statements can be found in the online supporting information.

The items measuring perceived threat from the United States were (Cronbach's alpha .7):

1. America has hostile intentions against China. (29.2.)
2. America poses a threat to China in the military front. (29.5.)
3. A growing American military is bad for China. (29.7.)

The items measuring perceived threat from Japan were (Cronbach's alpha .6):<sup>4</sup>

1. Japan has hostile intentions against China. (30.3.)
2. Japan poses a threat to China in the military front. (30.5.)

Most students (63%) were of the view that the United States has hostile intentions against China, and only 6% did not see the United States as having hostile intentions. An even greater number of students saw Japan as having hostile intentions against China (70%), with only 5% of respondents disagreeing. Many respondents were indecisive on this question and chose the middle option "neither agree nor disagree" regarding both the United States and Japan (31% in the case of the United States and 25% in the case of Japan).

The majority of respondents felt that both the United States and Japan pose a military threat to China. The threat from the United States was considered generally more severe than that of Japan. Sixty-four percent of respondents felt that the United States poses a military threat to China, whereas 44% felt that way about Japan. Twenty-nine percent of respondents chose "neither agree nor disagree" on the question of United States military threat, and 36% did the same on the question of Japanese military threat.

#### *National Attachment, Media Consumption, and Interest in Politics*

Following Kosterman and Feshbach's (1989) research, in the survey presented below, "nationalism" is defined as a view according to which one's country is superior to other countries and that

<sup>4</sup>There is disagreement whether Cronbach's alpha can be meaningfully used for two-item scales. See Eisinga, de Grotenhuis, and Pelzer (2013).

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics

	<i>N</i> (%)	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Gender			
Male	416 (56.1%)		
Female	325 (43.9%)		
Age	707	20.83	2.54
17–19	254 (36.0%)		
20–24	393 (55.6%)		
25–34	60 (8.4%)		
Place of origin			
Rural	131 (17.7%)		
Town/small city	306 (41.5%)		
Medium-sized city	150 (20.3%)		
Urban	151 (20.5%)		
Dissatisfaction with life			
Very unsatisfied	7 (0.9%)		
Not too satisfied	76 (10.3%)		
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	165 (22.3%)		
Satisfied	428 (57.7%)		
Very satisfied	65 (8.8%)		
Self-assessed social ranking on a scale of 1 to 10			
Three Top levels	54 (7.4%)		
Three Middle levels	395 (54.5%)		
Four Bottom levels	276 (38.1%)		
Travel abroad during the past 3 years			
Has been abroad	107 (14.4%)		
Has not been abroad	634 (85.6%)		
CCP membership			
CCP member	111 (15.1%)		
Probationary member	71 (9.7%)		
Not a member, but has applied for membership	140 (19.1%)		
Not a member, but has planned to apply for membership	65 (8.8%)		
Not a member	347 (47.3%)		
Perceived threat from the United States	750	3.63	.67
Perceived threat from Japan	751	3.63	.78
Media consumption	743	3.68	.60
Interest in politics	769	3.28	.70
Nationalism	735	2.98	.58
Patriotism	738	4.09	.49

provides for uncritical support of the home country's actions; "patriotism," on the other hand, is defined as a feeling of pride and emotional attachment to one's country.

Nationalism and patriotism were both measured using seven items, and participants responded to these items on a 5-point Likert scale from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Only statement seven on the patriotism scale was measured on a scale in which 4 indicated "very close" and 1 "not close at all." Statements one, two, four, and six on the nationalism scale and statements one, four, and five on the patriotism scale were borrowed from the questionnaire used by Gries et al. (2011). Statement five on nationalism scale and statements two, three, and six were borrowed from the questionnaire used by Fairbrother (2008).

The items in the nationalism scale were (Cronbach's alpha .77):

1. China's policy decisions are almost always right. (31.3.)
2. China is the best country in the world. (5.9.)

3. The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the Chinese. (5.4.)
4. I support my country whether its policies are right or wrong. (5.11.)
5. I think that the Chinese people are the finest people in the world. (6.1.)
6. Chinese foreign policies are almost always morally correct. (31.1.)
7. Generally speaking, China is a better country compared to most other countries. (5.6.)

The items of the patriotism scale were (Cronbach's alpha .82):

1. I am glad to be Chinese (6.11.).
2. I am very proud to be a Chinese (6.5.).
3. I love my country (5.12.).
4. I often regret that I am Chinese. (reverse coded) (6.2.)
5. Being Chinese is an important reflection of who I am. (6.3.)
6. I would like personally to help my country attain its goals. (6.7.)
7. How close do you feel to the following?—China (3.3.)

Means and standard deviations of both scales are included in Table 1.

Media consumption was compiled from answers to one question measuring the frequency of following different types of media sources. Here the response format ranged from 5 (*every day*) to 1 (*never*). The more the respondent followed these media sources, the higher their score was on the media measure.

Items measuring media consumption were:

How often do you use the following media? (38)

1. Television
2. Domestic radio
3. Newspapers
4. Magazines
5. *People's Daily*
6. Party newspapers or publications other than *People's Daily*

The Chinese public in general relies heavily on television as a source of information. Because of its popularity, television is one of the most controlled media in China (Brady, 2012; Reilly, 2012). Compared to the media-consumption patterns of the whole Chinese population, we find that, as expected, elite university students watch television much less as only 5% of the students watch television “almost every day or every day,” 27% of them watch it often, and the large majority of students only watch television occasionally (64%). Magazines and newspapers are more popular than television, as 36% often read magazines and 29% report the same regarding newspapers. Most students (58%) listen to domestic radio occasionally. The majority never reads *People's Daily* or Party newspapers other than *People's Daily*.

In addition to reporting their media consumption, respondents were asked about the perceived effect they think the media has on their opinions. Twenty-six percent disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement “The way I think about China has a lot to do with what I hear on television or read in the newspaper.” Almost a third of respondents were indecisive on this matter (27%), but the largest share of students agreed (47%) that the media influences their views on China. Despite acknowledging media influence, the majority (58%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Television and newspapers are biased in what they report about national affairs.” Thirty-seven percent of respondents chose “neither agree nor disagree” and only 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Interest in politics was measured with two items. The response format ranged from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*) for the statement on interest in domestic politics and 4 (“very interested”) to 1 (“not at all interested”) for the statement on international politics.

The items measuring interest in politics were:

1. I do not have much interest in national affairs. (Reverse coded) (7.1.)
2. How interested would you say you personally are in international politics? (36)

The youngest age groups tend to be less interested in politics than older age cohorts. In addition to Chen’s (2001) samples collected in 1995, 1997, and 1999, this trend can be identified in the Texas A&M University’s (2008) China Survey and in the World Values Survey’s China sample from 2012. Contrary to the views of young people in general, elite university students can be described as quite interested in both domestic and international politics and, thus, politically aware.

Sixty-three percent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I do not have much interest in national affairs.” Eleven percent agreed or agreed strongly whereas 26% chose “neither agree nor disagree.” Seventy-two percent reported they were fairly or very interested in international politics; only 2% said they were “not at all interested,” and 26% reported being “not so interested.”

### *Statistical Analysis*

The analysis was conducted in three steps. First, correlations of threat perceptions and explanatory variables (nationalism, patriotism, media consumption, and interest in politics) were tested. Second, the associations between explanatory variables and threat perceptions were tested using multivariate linear regression models. Third, the associations were further tested with linear regression models including the contribution of other potential explanatory factors to the relationships. Also, interaction terms between media and interest in politics were tested. All the analyses were performed using STATA 13 (StataCorp LP) statistical package.

## **Results**

Table 2 shows that perceived threats from the United States and Japan were positively correlated. Nationalism was positively correlated with both U.S. and Japan threat variables. Patriotism was significantly correlated with perceived threat from the United States and nationalism, but the correlation of patriotism and a Japanese threat did not achieve an accepted level of statistical significance. Consumption of media was positively correlated with perceived threat from the United States and Japan, as well as nationalism and patriotism. Interest in politics was positively correlated with perceived threat from the United States and Japan, nationalism, patriotism, and media consumption.

**Table 2.** Correlation Matrix on Threat Perceptions and Proposed Explanatory Variables

	U.S. Threat	Japan Threat	Nationalism	Patriotism	Media	Interest in Politics
U.S. threat	1.000	–	–	–	–	–
Japan threat	.50***	1.000	–	–	–	–
Nationalism	.12**	.10**	1.000	–	–	–
Patriotism	.09*	.07	.42***	1.000	–	–
Media	.36***	.60***	.11**	.09**	1.000	–
Interest in politics	.18***	.11**	.32***	.10**	.11**	1.000

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Multivariate Models of Perceived Threats From the United States and Japan

	Perceived Threat from the United States	Perceived Threat from Japan
Media consumption	.46/.34 (.05)***	.94/.59 (.05)***
Interest in politics	.14/.15 (.04)***	.07/.06 (.04)*
Nationalism	.09/.08 (.04)**	.06/.04 (.04)
Patriotism	-.06/-.04 (.05)	-.10/-.06 (.05)
Constant	1.42 (.25)***	-.12 (.25)
R <sup>2</sup>	.15	.36
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.15	.36
N	735	736

Note. Entries are unstandardized/standardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Multivariate models (Table 3) revealed that media consumption ( $p < .001$ ) and interest in politics ( $p < .001$ ) were significantly associated with perceived threats from the United States and Japan. Nationalism ( $p < .01$ ) was significantly associated with perceived threat from the United States but not with that of Japan. Patriotism was not significantly associated with perceived U.S. threat, and its  $p$ -value was slightly above the threshold also with regards to a Japanese threat.

**Table 4.** Multivariate Models of Perceived Threats from the United States and Japan Including All Available Explanatory Factors

	STD-Beta	t-Value	p-Value
<b>Perceived threat from the United States</b>			
Media consumption	.33	8.48	<.001
Interest in politics	.12	2.88	<.001
Patriotism	-.02	-.48	.63
Nationalism	.04	.99	.32
Gender	.03	.78	.44
Age	.04	.97	.33
Place of origin	-.04	-.89	.34
Dissatisfaction with life	.05	1.14	.26
Self-assessed social ranking	.02	.60	.55
Travel abroad	.02	.52	.61
CCP membership	<.01	.03	.98
University	-.04	-.93	.36
R <sup>2</sup>	.16		
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.14		
<b>Perceived threat from Japan</b>			
Media consumption	.63	18.92	<.001
Patriotism	-.08	-2.11	.04
Interest in politics	.05	1.38	.17
Nationalism	.02	.48	.63
Gender	-.02	-.61	.54
Age	.01	.33	.74
Place of origin	-.03	-.96	.34
Dissatisfaction with life	.05	1.61	.11
Self-assessed social ranking	-.02	-.65	.51
Travel abroad	.02	.45	.66
CCP membership	-.03	-.96	.34
University	<.01	-.04	.96
R <sup>2</sup>	.41		
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.39		

Note. The figures are standardized regression coefficients,  $t$ -values, and  $p$ -values.

In stage three, associations examined in multivariate models were tested further. Table 4 presents linear regression models, which show the adjusted associations of explanatory variables with perceived threats from the United States and Japan and the contribution of potential confounders to the relationships. Perceived threat from the United States was significantly associated with media consumption and interest in politics even when control variables were entered into the model. However, at this stage, nationalism turned statistically insignificant. In other words, those who used conventional media more and were interested in politics were more likely to view the United States as a threat to China.

Perceived threat from Japan was associated with media consumption. Interest in politics turned insignificant at this stage. Of the value-related variables, nationalism remained insignificantly associated with perceived threat from Japan, but patriotism turned significant: Those who were more patriotic were less likely to see Japan as a threat. In sum, those who consumed more conventional media and scored low on the patriotism scale were more likely to view Japan as a threat to China. In general, threat perceptions from both the United States and Japan and explanatory variables were quite robust to adjustments for all covariates considered. The linear regression models tested explained a relatively large amount of the variance of perceived threat from the United States (16%) and Japan (41%).

Finally, there was a significant interaction effect between the amount of media consumption and interest in politics related to perceived threat from Japan ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ), but not from the United States ( $\beta = .10, p = .073$ ). The association was stronger between media consumption and perceived threat from Japan when interest in politics was also higher ( $\beta = .57$  vs.  $\beta = .62$ ). Of the consumed individual-media types, television ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ), newspapers ( $\beta = .09, p < .001$ ), and magazines ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) were related with perceived threat from the United States and all but domestic radio with perceived threat from Japan (the  $\beta$ -range was from  $-.09$  in *People's Daily* to  $.77$  in magazines, all  $p$ -values  $< .001$ ).

## Conclusion

This research studied how personal and situational factors shape threat perceptions of the US and Japan among Chinese elite university students. Media consumption mattered more than presumed whereas nationalist and patriotic values were found less significant in comparison. In a context in which Chinese regime applies increasingly repressive measures on the media, media's role in building and maintaining enemy images may be in the increase. Even elite university students, who themselves acknowledge that the media is biased in its reporting, are strongly influenced by the negative news. On the other hand, the findings also raise new questions on the relationship between national attachment and foreign policy attitudes, as the two types of national attachment studied were associated with threat perceptions in ways that are somewhat contradictory with previous research.

Our findings revealed that students perceive the US and Japan as threats to China. However, educated Chinese respondents' threat perceptions on the US and Japan were built differently: while media consumption was the strongest predictor of perceived threat from both countries, perceptions of Japan were more influenced by it. Interest in politics was significantly associated with the US threat perception but not with that of Japan. Finally, respondents scoring high on the patriotism scale were less likely to perceive Japan as threatening.

Consequently, the first hypothesis on nationalism and threat perceptions was not confirmed. Nationalism was significantly associated with the US threat perception in stage two, but turned insignificant when all the background factors were included in the model. Second, those who follow "mainstream" media, such as television, *People's Daily* or Party publications were more likely to view the US and Japan as threats confirming hypothesis two. Hypothesis three, according to which interest in politics should increase the likelihood to perceive Japan and the US as threats, was only confirmed with regard to perceived threat from the US.

There was a significant interaction effect between the amount of media consumption and interest in politics related to perceived threat from Japan, but not from the US. When media consumption was

high, people with high interest in politics found Japan more threatening. However, increasing media consumption intensified threat perceptions of Japan also among those with lower interest in politics. In contrast, Gries and Sanders (2015) identified a different pattern in analysing threat perceptions of the US. In their sample, media consumption was defined by interest in politics, and respondents with low and high interest in international affairs reacted in opposite ways to increased exposure to news. In Gries' and Sanders' research (2015), for those with low interest in politics, increase in media consumption decreased perceived threat from the US, whereas for those with high interest in politics, it intensified threat perceptions.

It could be that negative content on Japan widespread in Chinese entertainment, plays a role in shaping threat perceptions and explains in part why threat perceptions on Japan were not defined by interest in politics: One does not need to follow news media to be exposed to negative portrayals of Japan. At this point, we have limited empirical research on how entertainment might shape people's views on Japan. Naftali (2018) interviewed Chinese middle-school students from various backgrounds. Some of them mentioned TV shows as a factor contributing to their negative impression of Japan. However, students from elite schools were very critical of TV dramas, described them as unrealistic and denied that TV shows had influenced their views. These findings are in line with the media bias elite university students' in our survey recognized. The question remains, how much media influence people's views even though they would describe them as biased in some ways?

As earlier research (Gries et al., 2011; Sinkkonen, 2013) has found a stronger connection between nationalism and international issues in contrast to patriotism, it is interesting that patriotism was significantly associated with perceived threat from Japan whereas nationalism was insignificant. It can be that nationalism has clearer links with other foreign policy relevant issues, which were not studied in this article.

Those with higher scores on the patriotism scale were less likely to perceive Japan as a threat. Moreover, neither nationalism nor patriotism was significant with regards to the perceived threat from the US in the final stage. There is little previous research to contextualise this finding using similar methodology applied in this research. Although much of the literature on Chinese national identity and nationalism tends to portray nationalism as something that will push China to adopt more aggressive foreign policies, there are few studies with empirical substance on relations between nationalism and foreign policy attitudes on the one hand, and nationalism and actual foreign policies on the other hand (Carlson, 2009; Johnston, 2013). Based on a sample collected in 2007, Sinkkonen (2013) found that "patriots" were in favour of international cooperation and they held similar views with "nationalists" only on Taiwan independence. It could be that higher scores on the patriotism scale indicate the kind of national self-esteem, which does not require elevating China above other countries and allows a less emotionally loaded assessment of Japan's military power. More research is needed to study the associations of patriotism and threat perception and patriotisms' links with foreign policy issues more broadly. Unfortunately, we cannot say much more on this association based on this dataset.

What was clear however, was that consumption of mainstream media increases threat perceptions. The exposure-acceptance model predicts that elite university students should be hard to influence by views presented in the media, but nonetheless media has a big role in constructing threat perceptions. Naturally the fact that East China Sea issue was topical at the time the survey was collected may have played a role in increasing negative news content on Japan, resulting in more widespread threat perceptions in this study. Media consumption had a strong association with threat perceptions and the background variables did not change these relationships. Moreover, the multivariate models explained a rather large part of the variance, which further emphasises the explanatory power of media consumption with regards to threat perceptions on Japan and the US. Recent research on Chinese media suggests that both commercial and non-commercial media outlets produce news in which Japan and the US are shown in more negative light than before. The strong role of media consumption in the formation of Chinese threat perceptions of the US and Japan implies that media marketization may

have started a vicious cycle of negative news coverage, resulting in deteriorating images of the US and Japan. As China shows increasingly authoritarian tendencies which affect the style of reporting in the media, there is a continuing need to study how public opinion reacts to changes in societal dynamics.

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