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Beyond Nationalism: Understanding Chinese Public Attitudes

Naima Green-Riley is an Assistant Professor at Princeton University and a 2023–24 Wilson China Fellow

Abstract

This research project uses survey methods to identify a Chinese version of individual-level authoritarianism, a psychological identity trait emphasizing traditional values and political obedience, and its effects on Chinese public foreign policy preferences. Despite growing attention to authoritarianism as a psychological predisposition affecting political preferences in the West, little research has been done to determine the effects of this trait in East Asian societies. This paper shows that authoritarianism is a strong predictor of attitudes toward China's role in the world and preferences for personal engagement with foreigners from the West.

Policy Takeaways and Recommendations

- Though many focus on nationalism as the key political trend to determine levels of hawkishness within China, authoritarianism—a disposition indicating a preference for tradition, political obedience, and collective deference to the majority—is a better indicator.

- More authoritarian individuals in China are actually more eager to see China playing an active role around the world and flexing its military might.

- Authoritarians express less enthusiasm for China's engagement in multilateral efforts and international collaboration than do nationalists.

- Authoritarians endorse preferential hiring of Chinese counterparts over Westerners, and they are also more likely to shy away from US travel or business when they feel the United States has harmed Chinese interests.

- These findings suggest that Western onlookers are putting too much emphasis on nationalism as an indicator of foreign policy preferences in China and undercounting the relationship between social values and international outlook. Policymakers would be wise to broaden the lens through which they examine public attitudes in China today.

Introduction

Given rising tensions, limited opportunities for people-to-people exchange, and significant cultural differences between the United States and China, discussions of Chinese public attitudes within the American intellectual and public spheres are often lacking in nuance and depth. The most frequently studied trait in current research on Chinese public attitudes is nationalism. Scholars have debated the rise of Chinese nationalism, its determinants, and its effects. However, as will be shown in the results from this research, nationalism is not always the best characteristic to measure when seeking to understand Chinese public attitudes toward politics and international affairs.

Some quickly dismiss the importance of understanding the Chinese public, arguing that the country's illiberal political system makes Chinese public attitudes largely irrelevant to global politics. Those individuals overlook the value of understanding the 1.4 billion people living in China today. Indeed, trends in Chinese public attitudes have implications for preferences for trade and international exchange, as well as how foreign individuals, companies, and organizations are treated in China.

This project uses tools and constructs from the field of political psychology to better develop our understanding of Chinese public attitudes toward authority and the outside world. In particular, it focuses on adapting the Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale—a battery of survey questions created in the West—to the Chinese context. Traditionally, RWA batteries have been used to understand levels of traditionalism, in-group preference, and deference to authority within (often conservative) populations in the United States and Europe. While some scholars have translated and used the scale in China, these translations have either abbreviated the measure or they have not adequately accounted for cultural differences between the US and Chinese contexts. For example, they conform to the original scale by asking respondents about "God's laws," invoking a Christian frame in a country where the religion is not popular. Through a survey pilot and testing that reframes cultural and social issues in a manner more suitable to the Chinese context, this project reimagines the scale so that it is better able to provide insight into individual-level differences in authoritarianism. Moreover, the study ties authoritarianism to attitudes about China's international role and tolerance (or intolerance) of foreign populations and entities within China.

Why the Emphasis on Chinese Nationalism?

Open any public affairs journal, international poll, or academic journal that discusses the Chinese public today, and you will be almost certain to find a reference to rising nationalism. A quick search of *Foreign Affairs* magazine yields over 800 results containing the term "Chinese nationalism." A top result, a February 2023 article by Yale Law School professor Taisu Zhang, quips: "Nationalism has become arguably the single most important Chinese political current in recent years, shaping both government behavior and public responses to it."[1]

In the academic literature on political science, as well, many have studied and analyzed trends in Chinese nationalism.[2] Suisheng Zhao describes Chinese nationalism as a pragmatic sentiment motivated by a historical memory of humiliation and a stinging sense of national pride; moreover, he argues that Chinese nationalism shapes ideas about national interests and China's territorial integrity.[3] Jessica Chen Weiss describes historical nationalist protest incidents in China as an indicator of public dismay toward international affairs that the Chinese government can either suppress or allow in order to strengthen its international bargaining position.[4] Scholars have linked nationalist sentiment in China to anti-foreign attitudes and political behavior within the Chinese public.[5]

At its core, nationalism is a sentiment tied up in loyalty to one's country, and it is often associated with high levels of endorsement for the political legitimacy of the ruling party.[6] In Chinese, the word "nationalism," is translated to *aiguozhuyi* (爱国主义), a phrase that emphasizes love for the country. Historically, scholars have focused on several different types of indicators to measure the concept. The Beijing Area Study, an annual, geographically representative survey of Beijing residents, has measured nationalism through three related questions,[7] gauging the degree to which respondents agree with these statements:

- "Even if I could choose any other country in the world, I would prefer to be a citizen of China."

- "In general, China is a better country than most others."

- "Everyone should support their government even when it is wrong."

How Does Authoritarianism Differ from Nationalism?

In attempting to explain a number of recent political events, including the rise of populist leaders in Western democracies and a move toward cultural protectionism manifested through policy decisions like 'Brexit,' the referendum-based decision of British citizens to leave the European Union, journalists and political pundits alike have given audience to a profusion of political science and political psychology literature explaining authoritarianism.[8] According to this literature, authoritarian personalities indicate a tendency towards collectivism and ideological rigidity, as well as a predisposition for intolerance towards racial/ethnic, moral, religious, or political out-groups.[9]

The vast majority of studies on authoritarianism and its political implications have been focused on the United States and other Western, liberal democracies. To date, little work has been done to expand the purview of the authoritarian dynamic to Asian contexts. Yet, there is much to gain from an adapted authoritarianism scale focused on China, especially

given its history of Confucian values of filial piety (孝) and loyalty (忠), which relate to the concept quite directly.[10] While the dominant variable used to discuss Chinese public attitudes in contemporary discourse is nationalism, a greater multiplicity of constructs would aid in adding deeper insight to our understanding of the Chinese public. Moreover, this type of work can help intellectuals in the United States to avoid reliance on overly simplistic tropes about Chinese thinking on policy matters.

Authoritarianism and Political Preferences

Before delving into the study below, it is worthwhile to briefly summarize the authoritarianism literature. Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* marked the first serious academic investigation of authoritarianism as a personal characteristic affecting social and political preferences.[11] The book was the result of a research project on religious and racial prejudice— and in particular, anti-Semitism— organized by the American Jewish Committee in the immediate aftermath of World War II. It described authoritarianism as a personality syndrome caused by a "hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitive parent-child relationship" that led to "a dichotomous handling of social relations as manifested especially in the formation of stereotypes and of ingroup-outgroup cleavages" later

in life.[12] Altemeyer re-envisioned authoritarianism thirty years later, describing it as a right-wing characteristic produced through social learning.[13] Altemeyer replaced Adorno et al.'s F-scale (F stood for fascism), which measured attitudes based on a set of nine categories, with the more psychometrically attuned Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale. Around the same time, John Duckitt identified conformity with in-group norms, emphasis upon respect and obedience to leaders, and intolerance towards people not conforming to the in-group's norms as three identifying characteristics of authoritarianism.[14]

Shortly after the release of *The Authoritarian Personality*, Daniel Levinson cautioned that a trend towards authoritarianism in American politics during the 1950s had "intensif[ied] our nationalistic-chauvanistic [sic] potentialities," thus threatening the nation's ability to "constitute a democratic force in the world and...reduce international tensions."[15]

Scholars have recently begun to apply constructs from political psychology to Chinese politics. For example, Rory Truex demonstrates that a number of personality traits indicating social isolation predict lower levels of satisfaction with the Chinese government.[16] Junhui Wu, Mingliang Yuan, and Yu Kou associate disadvantage during childhood with lower levels of trust in Chinese adolescents, and they then link this distrust to lower levels of behavior to benefit others or to help society as a whole.[17]

Scholars have produced a small but growing amount of work regarding the effect of authoritarianism upon political preference in East Asia. Dong-Kyun Im shows that higher levels of authoritarianism are associated with greater economic conservatism (i.e., opposition to redistribution) in China.[18] Similarly, Rong Chen and Peter Beattie find that Chinese individuals who exhibit high levels of authoritarianism tend to place themselves on the ideological right when asked.[19] Meanwhile, Sherry Jueyu Wu and Elizabeth Levy Paluck demonstrate that both Chinese and American workers randomly assigned to attend participatory group meetings in the workplace over a period of six weeks exhibit lower levels of authoritarianism than counterparts who do not attend such meetings.[20]

As noted by Deyong Ma and Feng Yang, values of filial piety and loyalty originating from Confucianism promote "deference to authority, worship, and dependence" in East Asian political cultures—all characteristics of authoritarianism.[21] The Chinese society, in particular, places heavy emphasis on

the threefold roles of the "benevolent patriarch" as father, husband, and ruler.[22] Due to their Confucian roots, East Asian societies tend to exhibit higher levels of authoritarianism than societies in the West. In fact, a cross-national study by James Liu, Li-Li Huang, and Catherine McFedries found that survey respondents in China, Taiwan, and Japan scored highest, respondents in the United States scored slightly below them, and respondents in New Zealand scored significantly lower on the RWA scale measure of authoritarianism.[23]

Beyond scoring high in authoritarianism, Chinese citizens also demonstrate especially high levels of collectivism and in-group favoritism. In one study, Americans, Koreans, and Japanese people all scored at comparable levels of collectivism, while citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were found to be significantly less individualistic and more collectivistic.[24] Another study compared the primacy of collectivism in determining in-group favoritism using samples from the United States and China, and ultimately concluded that Chinese respondents were more likely to show in-group favoritism, especially when primed with information that the out-group had performed better than the in-group.[25] This finding suggests that threat may exacerbate Chinese levels of out-group discrimination.

It is important, though, to consider the cultural context of Chinese authoritarianism, collectivism, and in-group favoritism. Several scholars defend these cultural trends, urging observers to understand the unique cultural history, social support structure, and political rationale behind them. Lucian Pye, for example, posits that years of foreign aggression made creating a salient Chinese social identity a political necessity.[26] On the other hand, James Liu, Mei-chih Li, and X. D. Yue emphasize the "balance between harmony and hierarchy- enhancing orientations," lamenting that Western social psychologists tend to portray East Asian authoritarian dispositions in an overly negative manner.[27] Richard Nisbett and his coauthors appear to agree, attributing Chinese in-group favoritism to the Confucian values of reciprocal social obligation and in-group harmony, rather than a focus on diminishing any particular out-group.[28]

The most coherent trend in the East Asian authoritarianism literature links the trait to domestic political trust. Tianjian Shi explored determinants of political trust in Taiwan and mainland China.[29] The paper found that political trust in Taiwan is based on government performance, whereas political trust

in mainland China is produced via authoritarian values encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). James Liu, Li-Li Huang, and Catherine McFedries used longitudinal data spanning the periods before and after the 2004 presidential elections in Taiwan to discern the effect of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) consolidation of power upon personal levels of authoritarianism.[30] The authors argued that the second victory of the DPP indicated to many that Taiwan would not soon return to Kuomintang (KMT) party rule, leading to an increase in levels of authoritarianism for DPP supporters post-election, despite the party's proclaimed "image of being pro-democracy and against oppression and discrimination."[31] Timothy Ka-ying Wong et al. studied the determinants of political trust in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Their article concluded that in many of these places, political and economic performance trumps cultural factors such as authoritarianism in determining political trust.[32] However, Deyong Ma and Feng Yang critique the measurement of authoritarianism used in this paper, which gauged authoritarianism by asking respondents whether it is good to respect traditional authority, as overly simplistic.[33] Using a more complex measure of authoritarianism in a sample of 13 Asian nations, Ma and Yang find that "authoritarian orientations are an independent cultural source of political trust in these societies."

A still-nascent literature links authoritarianism and foreign policy preferences in East Asia. James Liu and coauthors administered surveys to undergraduate psychology majors in the United States, New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan, and China to measure psychological predispositions and levels of militarism.[34] The authors were surprised to find that Chinese respondents who were high in authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (SDO) were not only more likely to support Chinese military intervention in Taiwan, but also US military intervention in Iraq. Liu et al.'s article serves as a compelling entrée into the study of Asian authoritarianism and foreign policy preferences.

Data and Methodology

This research paper features the results of an online survey administered by a professional survey firm in China in April and May 2024. The paper will share results from a pilot involving 989 individuals. Respondents were asked

to answer questions that measured levels of authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, nationalism, and attitudes regarding China's international role. The sample is not nationally representative. Rather, it is more urban, female, educated, wealthy, ethnically Han, and younger than is the broader Chinese society. If anything, the sample is more representative of the often politically attuned netizens living in China today. Nevertheless, the survey results shed some light on how psychological dispositions affect foreign policy attitudes among young, urban Chinese elites. Analyses use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to link authoritarianism and other dispositions to foreign policy preferences within the Chinese public.

Measuring Authoritarianism

The analyses in this project rely on an adapted version of a modernized RWA scale produced by psychologist Bob Altemeyer in 2006. The authoritarianism question battery consists of 20 statements with which respondents must register their level of agreement or disagreement on a 9-point agree-disagree scale. The questions are aimed at gauging individuals' traditionalism, their support for stronger leadership, and their (dis)approval of liberal social values.

The Altemeyer scale, however, is best suited for a Western society founded on Judeo- Christian values. To translate the scale to the Chinese context, a number of changes were required. First, specific references to God or Christianity were replaced with more general references to traditionalism. Consider this item from the 2006 Altemeyer scale: "God's laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late, and those who break them must be strongly punished."[35] In the new version of the scale, the question reads, "Traditional moral codes must be strictly followed before it is too late, and those who break them must be strongly punished (必须严格遵守传统的道德规范，否则就为时已晚，违反者必须受到严厉惩罚)."

Second, social trends that were unfamiliar in the Chinese context were modified. For example, the Altemeyer scale includes an item that reads: "There is absolutely nothing wrong with nudist camps." However, in China, where nudists have been detained and sentenced to jail, nudism is a much less prevalent activity.[36] As a result, in the new version of the scale, this item is

replaced with a question about a similarly progressive but more plausible category of activity, reading: "There is absolutely nothing wrong with polyamory, defined as developing romantic relationships with multiple people (多元伴侣关系 [同时与多人发展亲密关系] 完全没有错)."

Finally, the political dynamic in China makes direct questions about the government less desirable in a survey context. Asked directly about the need to obey their government, Chinese citizens may feel the need to overstate agreement due to concerns about repercussions if they do not. As a result, this version of the authoritarianism scale did not ask direct questions about following the government's rules. One item in the Altemeyer scale states: "It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds." The new version of the scale states: "It is always better to trust the judgement of those with legitimate permission to speak on issues rather than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds (相信有话语权的人的判断，总是比相信社会上试图给人们制造怀疑的捣乱分子的判断要好)."

Indicators for Comparison

Part of the purpose of this research is to distinguish between the effects of authoritarianism as compared to other psychological and social traits. For this reason, authoritarianism will be compared to both nationalism and social dominance orientation (SDO) as determinants of foreign policy attitudes. The study relies on a nationalism index using the same three questions from the Beijing Area Study.

Social dominance orientation (SDO) measures the extent to which individuals seek to reinforce group-based hierarchies, in which subjectively determined "superior" groups dominate "inferior" groups.[37] An individual with high SDO would exhibit a greater preference to maintain group-based hierarchy compared to others within his or her society. SDO also has implications for how individuals perceive groups in *other* societies. Recent work has indicated that high SDO is correlated with greater warmth towards those perceived to be more similar to one's "in-group."[38] Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto

note that "[w]hatever SDO values one has developed about intergroup relations of one type (e.g., between races) are likely to be applied to intergroup relations of other types (e.g., between nations or minimal groups).[39] This means that people will re-create new hierarchical intergroup relations from the fragments of old hierarchical intergroup relations." In other words, opinions of foreign societies can be heavily shaped by perceptions of appropriate social ordering in one's own society. The SDO scale has been used in the Chinese context in previous research,[40] and the same scale is applied here.

Outcomes of Interest

This research project endeavors to link authoritarian dispositions to foreign policy preferences in China. In order to do so, it also adapts several foreign policy survey questionnaires to the Chinese context. The first are the cooperative internationalism and the militant internationalism scales, defined as the "faces of internationalism" by Eugene Wittkopf.[41] Wittkopf envisions cooperative internationalism (CI) as a measure of an individual's attitudes towards multilateralism and international collaboration to solve global problems. He describes militant internationalism (MI) as a measure of an individual's attitudes towards military tools of foreign policy, international aggression, and the use of force abroad.

The survey also includes a measure of isolationism, borrowed from Joshua Kertzer and coauthors.[42] The scale measures the degree to which respondents believe that China should move away from an active global role and scale down activities aimed at global leadership.

Findings

Regression analysis reveals that authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and nationalism are distinct traits that have different levels of impact on foreign policy attitudes among Chinese survey takers. Authoritarianism is the strongest indicator of support for Chinese military action overseas, outstripping nationalism as a predictor. Meanwhile, individuals exhibiting high levels of authoritarianism are less likely to endorse China's cooperation with other nations on the global stage. Nationalists are more likely to support greater

FIGURE 1. Correlations between dispositional characteristics and militant/ cooperative inter- nationalism. Estimates come from OLS regressions with standard social and demographic control covariates, including age, gender, education level, income level, urban/rural residence, and attention to news. Plots display both 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals.
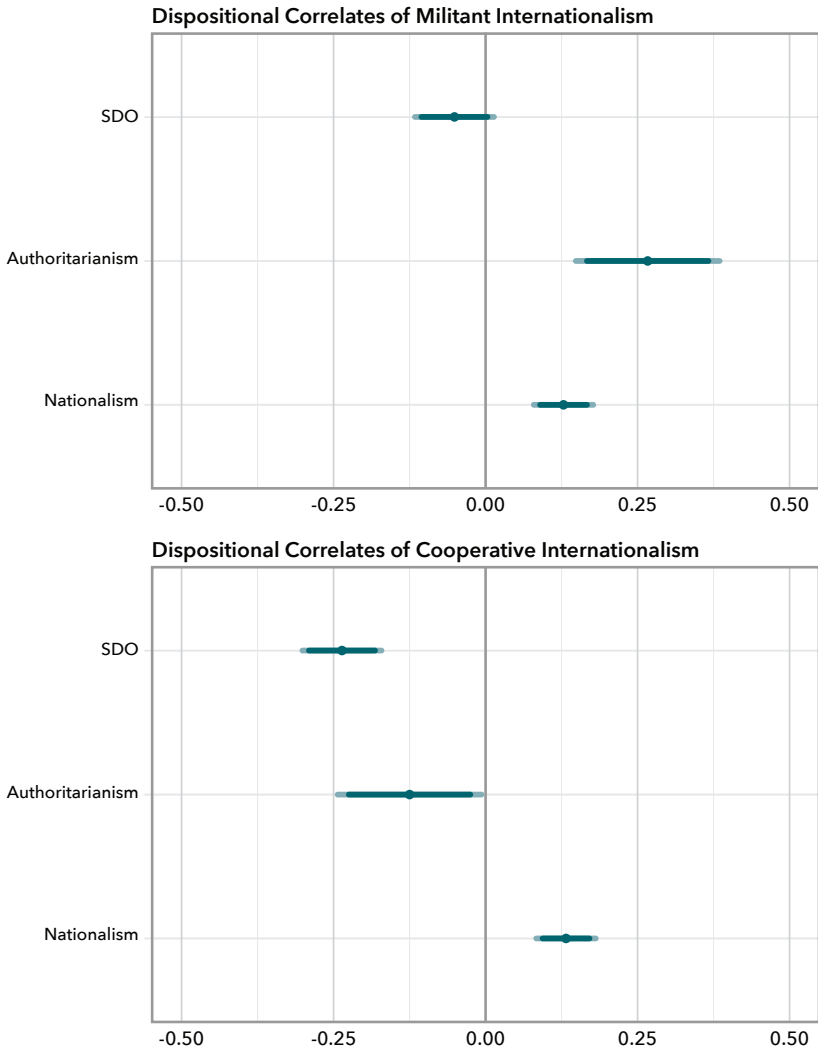
FIGURE 2. Correlations between dispositional characteristics and isolationism. Estimates come from OLS regressions with standard social and demographic control covariates, including age, gender, education level, income level, urban/rural residence, and attention to news. Plots display both 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals.
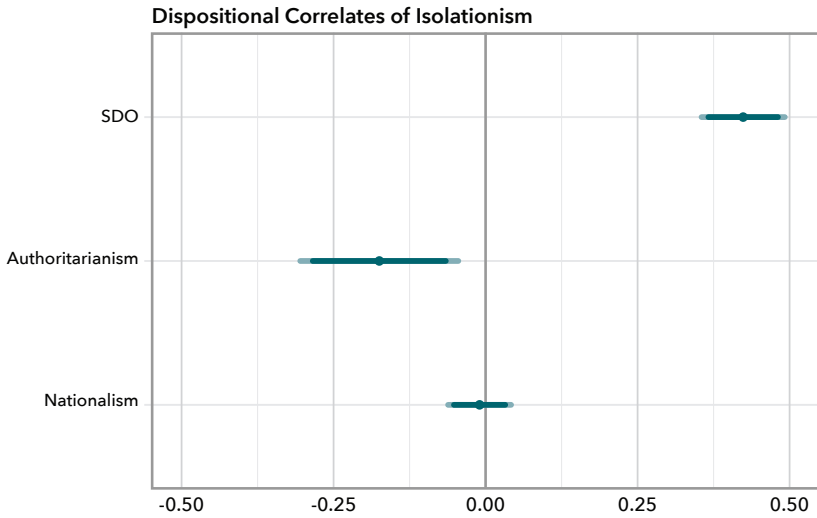
cooperative engagement with other countries; in contrast, those with a preference for maintaining societal hierarchies prefer that China collaborates less with the international community.

Nationalism does not help to predict levels of isolationism at all in the sample. Instead, authoritarianism is correlated with greater support for China taking a more active role internationally, while supporters of social dominance (those with a preference for hierarchy) support less global activity for China overseas. In sum, these findings make clear that traits often associated with Chinese "nationalists" in the media and the academe, such as military belligerence, disdain for international cooperation, and strong support for Chinese global leadership, are actually more accurately attributed to Chinese authoritarians.
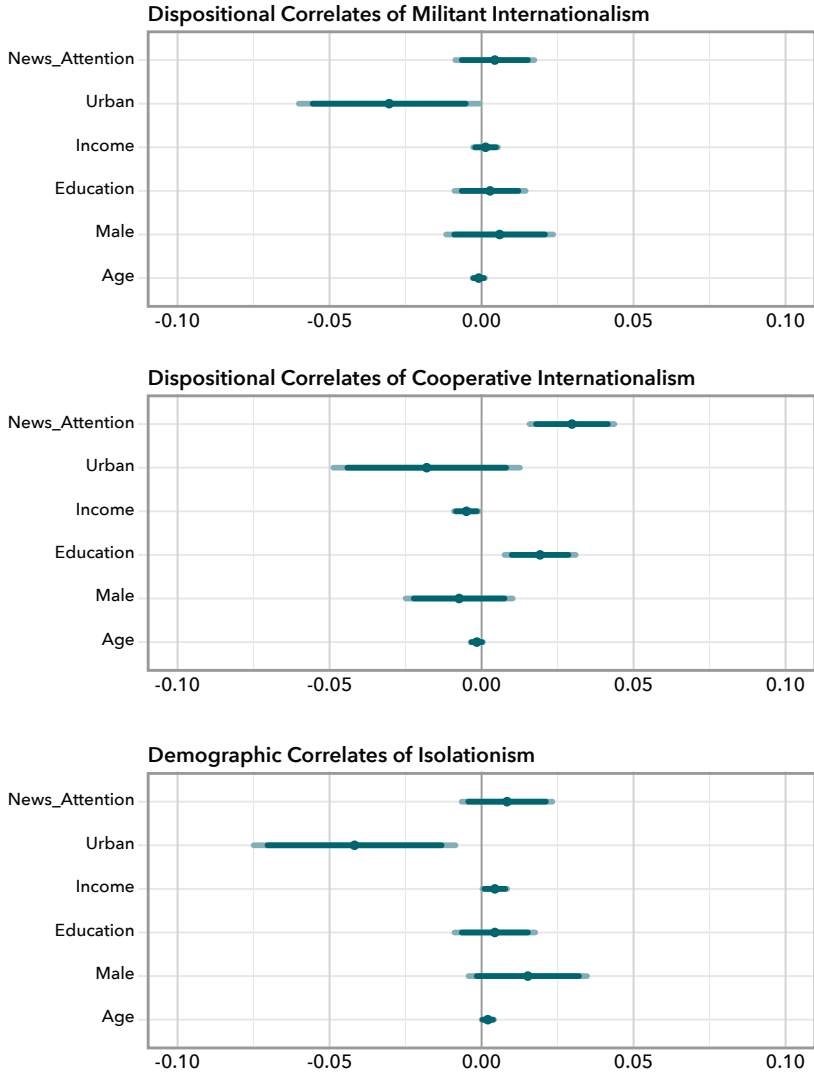
The demographic predictors for militant internationalism, cooperative internationalism, and isolationism are interesting in their own right. There are few demographic indicators of support for greater Chinese military engagement overseas: those in rural areas are slightly more likely to score high in MI, though this finding is only significant at confidence levels of 90 percent. Higher education, lower income, and greater attention to the news are associated with more support for international collaboration. Older and rural Chinese people prefer a more isolationist China. Those with higher incomes also prefer isolationism, but this last finding is statistically significant only at a confidence interval of 90 percent.

Finally, the results from the survey show that individual-level authoritarianism also predicts attitudes toward Western individuals and entities. Authoritarians are more likely to agree with the idea that local Chinese job applicants should be hired over individuals from the West. They are also more likely to endorse eschewing travel to America and business with US companies when they perceive US actions as harmful to China. In comparison, social dominance orientation and nationalism are not strong predictors of agreement with the first idea, and they are not as strongly correlated with agreement with the second.
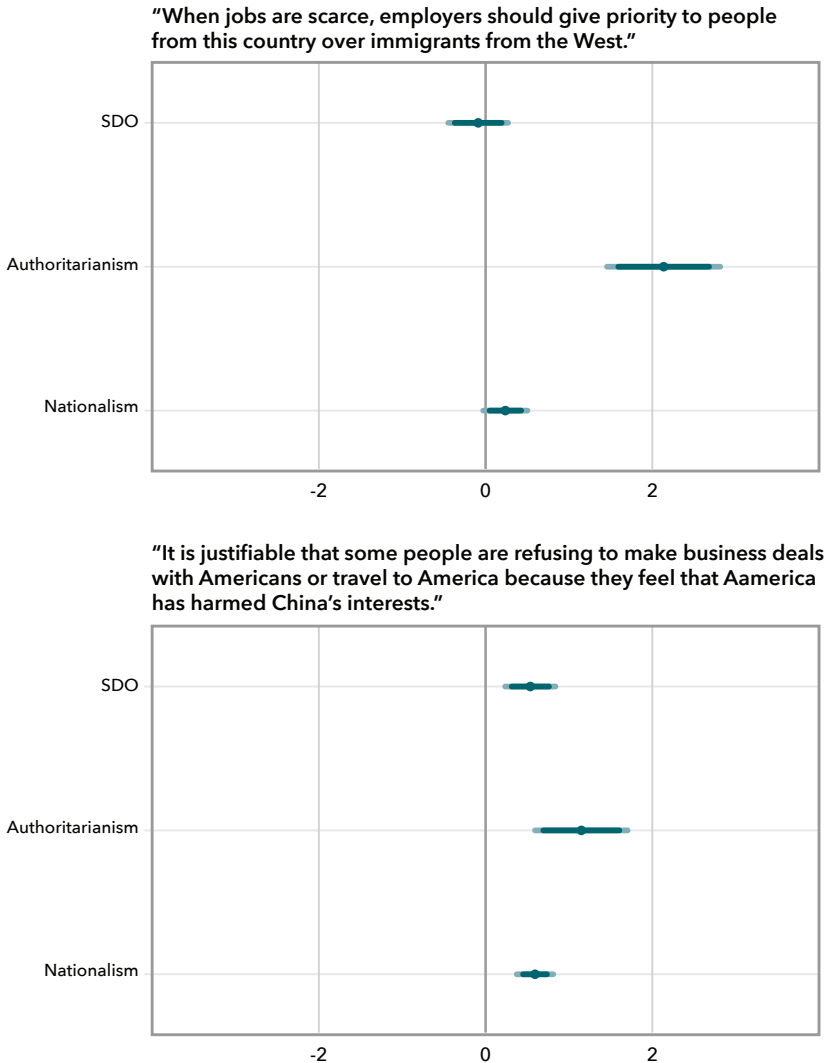
Policy Implications

In recent scholarship and intellectual discussions of China, there is a persistent focus on Chinese nationalism as a catalyst for more aggressive and less cooperative public sentiment. While Chinese nationalism predicts militarism, individual levels of authoritarianism within Chinese survey takers are a stronger indicator of military support and antisocial affect towards the West. These findings are important because they indicate that anti-progressive, collectivist tendencies lie at the root of these foreign policy preferences and affect them more than love for one's country. They also imply that domestic and foreign policy attitudes are intrinsically linked—authoritarians are the individuals in Chinese society who are the most supportive of strong leadership (such as the leadership exercised by Xi) and the least approving of liberal social trends that are gaining popularity in China's more cosmopolitan urban centers. Through a better understanding of the domestic politics surrounding globalization in China and traditionalist

FIGURE 3. Correlations between different demographic variables and foreign policy preferences using estimates from OLS regressions. Estimates come from the OLS regressions shown above, which also estimate coefficients for social dominance orientation, authoritarianism, and nationalism. Plots display both 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals.

Dispositional Correlates of Militant Internationalism

Dispositional Correlates of Cooperative Internationalism

Demographic Correlates of Isolationism

FIGURE 4. Correlations between dispositional characteristics and attitudes about interactions with the West. Estimates come from OLS regressions with standard social and demographic control covariates, including age, gender, education level, income level, urban/rural residence, and attention to news. Plots display both 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals.

"When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people from this country over immigrants from the West."

"It is justifiable that some people are refusing to make business deals with Americans or travel to America because they feel that Aamerica has harmed China's interests."

backlash, scholars and pundits alike may gain a greater understanding of the fault lines that determine Chinese attitudes toward foreign policy.

What practical implications, if any, does this have for those of us outside of China? First and foremost, this research has the potential to broaden the aperture on policy attitudes in China today. Both nationalism and authoritarianism predict support for the CCP in China. However, a singular focus on "nationalism" within the Chinese public does little more than tell us how much Chinese citizens love and support their country. Measures of authoritarianism, on the other hand, clarify the social issues that animate political trust within groups that score high on these survey items in China: an eye towards traditional values, a preference for deference to the collective, and concerns about those who wish to challenge these things. It is helpful to identify the characteristics within Chinese society that predict CCP support based on something other than nationalism so as to better comprehend how values play into the resilience of the party-state.

Moreover, this research sheds light on the direct connections between the domestic social concerns of authoritarians and their preferences for foreign policy. Scholars of RWA have shown that authoritarians tend to react defensively to threats to the social order.[43] In China, top-down narratives about prioritizing cultural security (文化安全) abound. Keen policymakers will recognize that Chinese citizens displaying the greatest enthusiasm for attention to cultural security will likely be authoritarians. If the results of this preliminary study persist in the future, then China watchers should expect that higher levels of pro-militarism and greater enthusiasm for expanding China's international role will cooccur with wariness toward cultural threat domestically. Furthermore, in the tense atmosphere of US-China relations today, it is authoritarians who are most likely to exhibit prejudicial behavior toward Western individuals and firms.

Importantly, paying greater attention to psychometric measures like authoritarianism also has the potential to bring greater discernment to policy discussions about the Chinese public. The range of scores on the authoritarianism scale rest along a spectrum: some score high, while others score low. Given this reality, this attitudinal metric can bring into clearer focus which groups are more likely to express hawkish views and which groups are not within the Chinese citizenry.

Conclusion

This article explains how the authoritarian disposition to be intolerant of outsiders manifests itself within the Chinese public today. In doing so, it sheds light on how Confucian filial values and a distaste for progressive trends yield a distinctly Chinese version of individual-level authoritarianism. Analysis of original survey data indicates that authoritarianism is a strong predictor of militant internationalism and support for Chinese global engagement. Moreover, high levels of Chinese authoritarianism predict greater economic discrimination against Westerners. The relationship between authoritarianism and these outcomes is stronger and more consistent than the relationship between nationalism or social dominance orientation to the same outcomes.

Not enough research has been done on the nature and impacts of authoritarianism outside of the West. In the future, further inquiry into how authoritarian dispositions affect political participation and foreign affairs in East Asia may build upon the insights developed through this study. Nevertheless, this research serves as an initial foray into the topic of authoritarianism and its effect on foreign policy preferences in China.

Acknowledgements

Notes

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