

## RESEARCH NOTE

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# TAIWAN CITIZENS' VIEWS OF CHINA: WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CROSS-STRAIT CONTACTS?

### Abstract

Segregation has long been recognized as a source of ignorance which breeds negative feelings and hostility. This view maintains that interactions between members of different groups can foster social bonds and promote positive group relationship. Employing recently collected survey data, this study examines the effect of cross-Straits contacts on Taiwan citizens' negative views toward Chinese citizens and the Beijing government. The empirical results show that casual encounters have no effect on the island residents' general perception of China. Serious interactions in the form of friendship moderate their unfavorable feelings of Chinese citizens but have no effects on the perception of a hostile Beijing. Unless contacts can invoke true social bonds, frequent interactions do not have transformative effects on individuals' political views. The moderating effect of contacts at the personal level is not transferable to a political entity when the latter is perceived as a suppressing agent.

### Keywords

Taiwan, China, contact theory, cross-Straits relations

Scholars of social psychology have long recognized that segregation is a source of ignorance, and that ignorance breeds negative feelings and hostility. Generally characterized as contact theory, this view maintains that interactions between members of different groups can foster social bonds and reduce negative feelings (Allport 1954). The theory was initially applied to the study of interracial relations in the United States and later extended to the analysis of prejudice against other groups. A vast literature generally supports the theoretical expectation that contacts between different groups moderate animosity and promote positive intergroup relations (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

Although contact theory has been traditionally used to analyze mutual group perception within a country, it can be equally applied to studying the effects of expanding cross-Straits exchanges. Employing data of two surveys recently conducted in Taiwan, this research explores a changing, though limited, pattern of the island residents' views of Chinese citizens and the Beijing government. The analysis shows that while "casual contacts" between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have been close and intense in recent years, this has not changed the Taiwan public's negative perceptions of China and its citizens. Only "serious contacts" like friendship can moderate the island residents' unfavorable views of Chinese citizens; but even these have no effects on their perception of a

hostile Beijing government. These findings must trouble Chinese leaders who have heavily promoted exchanges between China and Taiwan, hoping frequent cross-Strait interactions may foster a shared vision of a unified Chinese nation. Unless the Beijing government makes substantive changes to its policies toward Taiwan, the island citizens' negative perceptions of China and its citizens are not likely to improve.

#### CONTACT AND PREJUDICE

Scholars of race relations have long speculated about the potential effects of intergroup contact on the reduction of prejudice. Some of the early studies on interracial relations in the United States examined the effects of black–white contact on racial attitudes of persons in the military (Brophy 1946), in police forces (Kephart 1957), in universities, and in public housing (Deutsch and Collins 1951; Wilner, Walkley and Cook 1955; Works 1961). The researchers found that as intergroup contacts expanded, black and white seamen, police officers, students, and housewives developed a sense of mutual understanding and a less hostile racial attitude.

For the next half-century, these early studies inspired extensive research on the effects of contact on intergroup relations (e.g., Amir 1969, 1976; Dixon 2006; Forbes 1997; Pettigrew 1971; Sigelman and Welch 1993; Sigelman et al. 1996). The analysis was extended with participants of physically disabled and mentally ill groups and homeless people (Harper and Wacker 1985; Lee, Farrell and Link 2004; Naor and Milgram 1980). Another study was conducted on the effects of interracial group contact in post-apartheid South Africa (Durrheim and Dixon 2010). A meta-analysis of all of these studies by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) shows that the effects of contact on the reduction of prejudice are generally robust and occur in the absence of the optimal conditions discussed by Allport (1954).

Why can contacts promote positive group relationships? Two separate but related answers are exposure and the availability of information. Acquaintance raises the awareness of the target group and its members' perspectives as well as issues concerning them. As greater exposure increases awareness, familiarity with the target groups further enhances positive regard of those groups (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In addition, regular contact with target groups is an important source of information. As Sigelman and Welch (1993) illustrate, whites may use their own black friends, neighbors, and/or coworkers as points of reference when they encounter blacks. The very fact of their friendship should positively influence how they perceive and interact with blacks. Without such firsthand information, whites will rely on whatever information they may have, which is frequently very negative about blacks.

That being said, not all encounters between different groups have equal effects. Casual contacts, such as random encounters on streets or at restaurants, usually leave no prints on individuals' cognitive experiences. Such occasional encounters present little or no transformative effects. Alternatively, casual contacts sometimes may exacerbate negative feelings because close proximity without familiarity could bring stereotypes to mind. Serious contacts, like those based on friendship or interactions in work places, are nonrandom and generate true acquaintance. Such contacts occur at a personal level, invoke genuine feeling, and bring about true knowledge of the target group (Allport 1954).

Although contact theory has traditionally been used to study group interactions within a country, it can also be employed to analyze the social and economic exchanges between China and Taiwan. Indeed, animosity between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait has lasted for more than half a century, due to Beijing's forceful assertion of sovereignty over Taiwan. Treating the island as a renegade province and vowing to unify Taiwan "with the motherland" (National People's Congress 2004), Chinese leaders have vigorously isolated the Taipei government from the international community and backed their claim with military force. Despite this animus, people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait relate to the same cultural heritage and speak a common language. Many island citizens can trace their ancestral roots and enjoy family connections on the Chinese Mainland. While the political border is clearly defined between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, the cultural boundary is fluid (Copper 2003).

Meanwhile, Beijing leaders have also purposely implemented a policy of expanding cross-Strait exchanges in order to win the hearts and minds of Taiwan citizens. They hope that people-to-people contact may reduce decades-old animosity and help form a shared vision of a unified Chinese nation (National People's Congress 1979). Contacts in economic and social forms have been employed by Beijing as a policy tool for its cause of unification. As a result, exchanges between China and Taiwan have flourished since Taipei lifted the ban on cross-Strait interactions in 1987 for humanitarian reasons.

Contact theory thus provides a theoretical underpinning for analyzing the Taiwan public's perception of China. As noted, the theory is intended to assess group interactions within a country. By extending contact theory to cross-Strait exchanges, this study aims to examine whether such interactions also have any effects on the perception of a government for which contacts are made. It is hypothesized that casual contacts generally present little transformative or even negative effects, whereas serious contacts in the form of friendship and working partnerships tend to positively shape Taiwan citizens' opinions of Chinese citizens and the Beijing government.

#### CROSS-STRAIT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Cross-Strait exchanges have expanded further after Ma Ying-jeou was elected president of Taiwan in 2008. The Ma administration adopted an engagement strategy by advancing its relations with Beijing on the basis of "one China with different interpretations" (Ma 2008), an approach dubbed the 1992 Consensus (Su and Cheng 2002). Ma's position sharply contrasts with that of his pro-independence predecessor. Chinese leaders thus welcomed Ma's policy of rapprochement. For its part, the Beijing government has come to the realization that its coercive tactics during Taiwan's 1996 and 2000 presidential elections only invited resentment and alienated the island citizens (see Garver 1997; Wang 2001). Chinese leaders have since placed substantial emphasis on the tactic of economic integration (Tung 2005; Wang, Lee, and Yu 2011). A series of agreements was signed between the two governments, including a landmark trade deal that granted generous economic concessions to Taiwan. As a result, China is now Taiwan's largest trading partner and the top destination of Taiwanese investment. Along with these economic activities, business people shuttle routinely between Taiwan and China, while many of them have now relocated to the Mainland. Meanwhile, the Ma administration also significantly relaxed restrictions on cross-Strait tourism. The number of Chinese

tourists to Taiwan has increased exponentially, from less than 100,000 in 2008 to 3.3 million in 2014 (Mainland Affairs Council 2015). Within this context, citizens of both sides of the Taiwan Strait are expected to have ample opportunities for interaction.

Indeed, the survey data in Table 1 show that 65 percent of the 2013 respondents had casual contacts with Chinese visitors at such places as malls, parks, and restaurants. By the end of 2014, the proportion of respondents experiencing such casual contacts increased to 83 percent. These random encounters provide Taiwan citizens with occasional opportunities to interact with tourists from China. In addition, the Taiwan public has more serious interactions with their Chinese counterparts, because more than one-third of the respondents in both surveys claimed that they have Chinese friends, and about 16–22 percent of them have working relationships with citizens on the Mainland. This evidence is indicative of the expanded cross-Strait contacts associated with the close economic exchanges between China and Taiwan.

Before assessing the effects of cross-Strait contacts, it is useful to report aggregate results from surveys on Taiwan citizens' perceptions of the Beijing government. Figures 1 and 2 show that a large proportion of the islanders have consistently sensed a "hostile Beijing" since 1995. The perceived antagonism of Beijing toward the Taipei government reached one of its highest points during the period 2000–2008, when the pro-independence President Chen Shui-bian was in office, and 60–70 percent of the island citizens sensed hostility from across the Taiwan Strait. Although their perceptions of Beijing's unfriendliness toward the Taiwan public was lower, 40–50 percent of the islanders constantly felt Beijing's enmity throughout this period. Both types of perceived animosity witnessed some reduction after Ma took office in 2008, but about half of the island citizens continue to perceive a hostile Beijing.

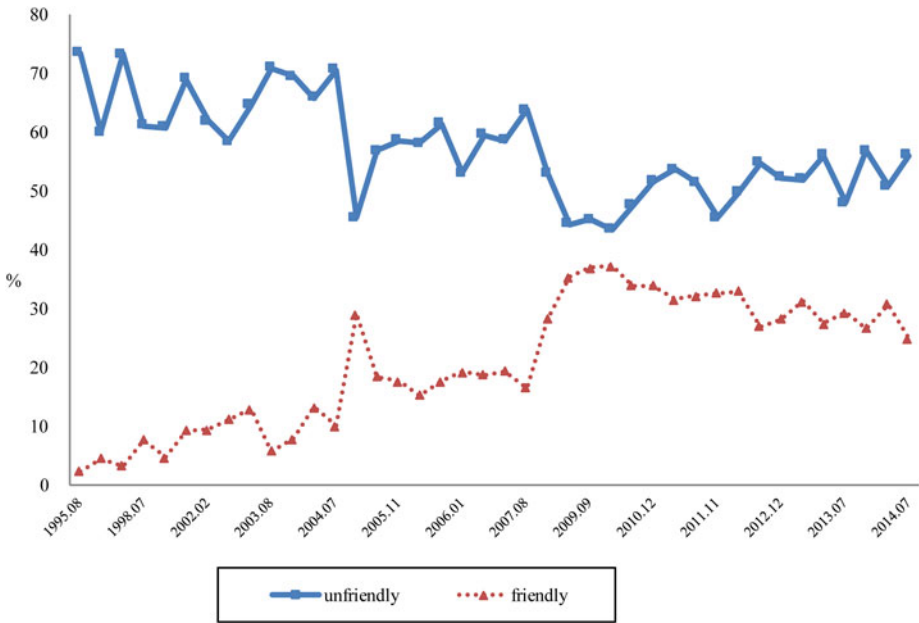
Taiwan residents also possess a negative view of Chinese citizens. Survey results (not displayed here) show that only about one-quarter to one-third of respondents have a favorable view of their counterparts from the Mainland as Chinese citizens are generally considered "rowdy" and have a "lack of respect of public space and order."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the negative view of Chinese citizens has improved from 2013 to 2014. While the

**TABLE 1 Taiwan Citizens' Contacts with Chinese Citizens**

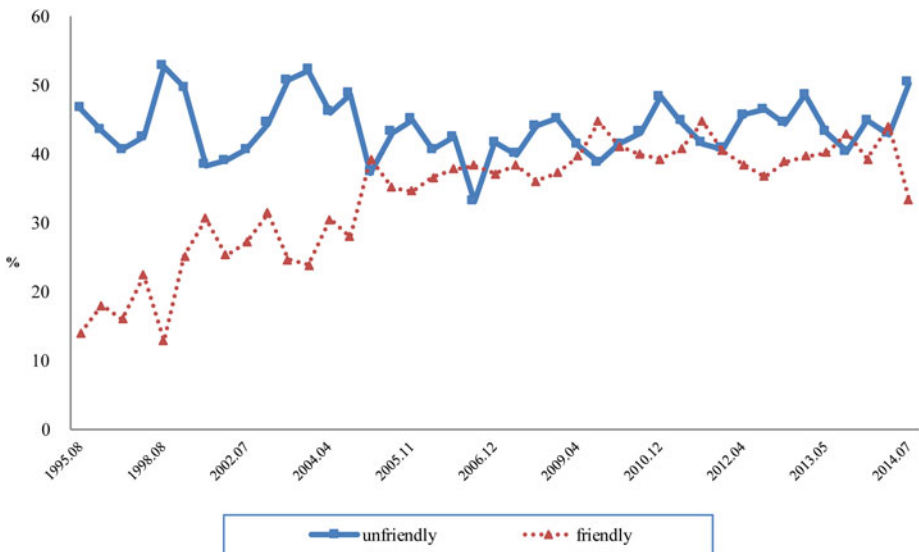
	Casual Contacts with Chinese Citizens		Having Chinese Friends		Having Chinese Working Partners	
	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014
No	34.5 (541)	15.8 (239)	60.2 (944)	63.4 (961)	84.0 (1317)	78.1 (1184)
Yes	65.2 (1022)	83.4 (1265)	39.7 (622)	36.6 (555)	15.8 (247)	21.8 (331)
No Response	0.3 (5)	0.9 (13)	0.1 (2)	0.1 (1)	0.3 (4)	0.1 (2)
Total N	1568	1517	1568	1517	1568	1517

Note: columns show percentage/(frequency).

Data from: Cheng (2013, 2014)

**FIGURE 1 Beijing's Hostility toward the Taipei Government, 1995–2014**

Data from: Chen (2006); Cheng (2011, 2013, 2014); Chu (2003, 2008, 2012); Huang (2002, 2013); Mainland Affairs Council (2014); Ching-hsin Yu (2008, 2010, 2011); Eric Yu (2010)

**FIGURE 2 Beijing's Hostility toward the Taiwan People, 1995–2014**

Data from: Chen (2006); Cheng (2011, 2013, 2014); Chu (2003, 2008, 2012); Huang (2002, 2013); Mainland Affairs Council (2014); Ching-hsin Yu (2008, 2010, 2011); Eric Yu (2010)

plurality of respondents continues to hold a negative view of Chinese citizens, the favorable impression has increased by seven percentage points.

Are these positive developments in Taiwan citizens' views of the Beijing government and Chinese citizens indicative of the moderating effects of cross-Strait contacts? A preliminary analysis of bivariate relations between contacts and the island residents' perceptions (not displayed here) shows mixed results. Specifically, casual interactions with Chinese tourists at restaurants, department stores, or parks have a statistically significant association only with the public's view about Beijing's treatment of the island residents. Such incidental interactions do not have any association with the islanders' unfavorable perception of Chinese citizens or Beijing's ill-treatment of the Taipei government. Respondents who have serious contacts with Chinese citizens, that is, friendships and working partnerships, tend to have a more favorable perception of China. That being said, the majority of Taiwan residents consistently hold the image of a Beijing that is hostile to the Taipei government despite serious contacts with their Mainland counterparts.

In summary, the Taiwan public in general possesses a negative perception of Chinese citizens and the Beijing government. The preliminary analysis shows that transformative effects of cross-Strait contacts seem to come mainly from serious relationships, such as friendships or partnerships at workplaces.

#### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS

To further discern the relationship between contact and individuals' perceptions of China, multivariate analyses are in order. Three dependent variables are created: *Good Impression of Chinese Citizens*, *Friendly Beijing towards Taiwan People*, and *Friendly Beijing towards the Taipei Government*. All three variables are coded dichotomously, with 1 indicating a favorable view of Chinese citizens, a Beijing that is friendly toward the Taiwan people, or a Beijing that is friendly toward the Taipei government, and 0 otherwise. To assess the transformative effects of casual contacts and serious contacts, the data presented in Table 1 are used to generate three dummy variables: *casual contacts with Chinese tourists*, *having Chinese friends*, and *having Chinese working partners*.

A series of control variables are also included in the analysis. To assess the effects of island citizens' identity, respondents with a *Taiwanese identity* or a *Chinese identity* are coded 1 in the relevant categories and 0 otherwise, while respondents with a dual identity, those who consider themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese, serve as the baseline group. Individuals holding Chinese identity are expected to have a more favorable view of their Mainland counterparts and the Beijing government, while respondents with a Taiwanese identity are hypothesized to hold a negative view. Two partisan dummies, *Pan-Blue affiliation* and *Pan-Green affiliation*, are created with 1 for respondents in the relevant categories and 0 otherwise, with nonpartisan voters as the baseline group. Citizens who identify with the pro-independence Pan-Green camp are expected to hold a negative view of China, whereas those associated with the Pan-Blue camp are hypothesized to hold a more moderate view. Respondents' education level and gender are coded as two dummy variables, *college (and above)* and *female*, with 1 for those who are in the relevant categories and 0 otherwise. Logit models with binary outcomes are employed to analyze data of both surveys. Because the results are broadly similar,

only the analysis of the 2014 survey are presented in Table 2 and there are several major findings.

First, none of the regression coefficients associated with casual contacts is statistically significant. Random encounters with Mainland tourists do not have any effect on the Taiwan public's views of China and its citizens. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that incidental interactions have little, if any, transformative effect on individuals' cognitive experiences and political views.

Second, for forms of serious contact, only having Chinese friends has a moderating effect on the island residents' negative view of Mainland citizens. Respondents who have Chinese friends are about two to three times higher in odds to develop a more positive view of Chinese citizens. But such contacts do not temper the island residents' perception of a hostile Beijing. Respondents who have Chinese friends continue to regard the Beijing government as unfriendly to Taiwan people and to the Taipei government.

**TABLE 2 Cross-Strait Contacts and Taiwan Citizens Political Views, 2014**

	Good Impression of Chinese Citizens		Friendly Beijing towards Taiwan People		Friendly Beijing towards Taipei Government	
	Coef (S.E.)	OR (% OR Change)	Coef (S.E.)	OR (% OR Change)	Coef (S.E.)	OR (% OR Change)
Casual Contact	-0.31 0.21	0.73 (-27)	0.40 0.22	1.49 (49)	-0.11 0.24	0.90 (-10)
Chinese Friend	0.86** 0.14	2.37 (137)	0.14 0.15	1.15 (15)	0.02 0.16	1.02 (-2)
Chinese Working Partner	0.13 0.16	1.14 (14)	0.26 0.17	1.30 (30)	-0.01 0.19	0.99 (-1)
Taiwanese Identity	-0.87** 0.15	0.42 (-58)	-0.83** 0.15	0.44 (-56)	-1.16** 0.16	0.31 (-69)
Chinese Identity	-0.11 0.36	0.90 (-10)	0.27 0.38	1.31 (31)	0.03 0.36	1.03 (3)
Pan-Blue Affiliation	0.33* 0.17	1.40 (40)	1.16** 0.17	3.19 (219)	0.92** 0.17	2.51 (151)
Pan-Green Affiliation	-0.65** 0.16	0.52 (-48)	-0.77** 0.17	0.46 (-54)	-0.73** 0.21	0.48 (-52)
Hakka	-0.36 0.20	0.70 (-30)	-0.01 0.20	0.99 (-1)	0.07 0.22	1.07 (7)
Mainlander	0.10 0.23	1.10 (10)	0.39 0.23	1.47 (47)	0.54* 0.23	1.72 (72)
College and above	-0.23 0.15	0.80 (-20)	-0.03 0.15	0.97 (-3)	0.10 0.17	1.11 (11)
Female	-0.10 0.13	0.91 (-9)	-0.44** 0.14	0.65 (-35)	-0.28 0.15	0.75 (-25)
Age	-0.01* 0.00	0.99 (-1)	-0.01 0.01	0.99 (-1)	-0.00 0.01	0.99 (-1)
N	1115		1196		1210	

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed test; Coef: coefficient; S.E.: standard error; OR: odds ratio.

Data from: Cheng (2014).



Meanwhile, having professional relationships with Chinese citizens, has no effects on the Taiwan public's views about China. Unlike friendship that generates true social bonds and thus presents transformative effects, Taiwan citizens appear to treat working relationships merely as part of the job.

Finally, compared with respondents who have a dual identity or no partisan affiliation, those with a Taiwanese identity or an affiliation with the Pan-Green camp are more likely to have negative views of Chinese citizens and the Beijing government, whereas those affiliated with the Pan-Blue camp tend to possess a more positive view. These results are consistent with theoretical expectations. Older islanders tend to hold an unfavorable view of Chinese citizens and female respondents are more likely to perceive a hostile Beijing.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of cross-Straits confrontations over Taiwan's sovereignty, the island citizens generally hold negative feelings toward China. Despite this animosity, economic interactions between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have flourished substantially during the past two decades. Contacts between citizens of China and Taiwan have increased as a result. Taipei's engagement policy during the Ma administration has further expanded the opportunities for cross-Straits interactions in recent years. Have expanded cross-Straits contacts influenced the Taiwan public's negative view of Chinese citizens and the Beijing government?

Making a distinction between casual and serious contacts, the empirical results indicate that incidental interactions have no effect on Taiwan citizens' general perception of China. The public continues to hold negative views of the Beijing government and its citizens despite increased encounters with Chinese tourists at malls, parks, and restaurants. While serious contacts in the form of friendship moderate the island residents' unfavorable perception of Chinese citizens, professional relationships with Mainland citizens do not have any effect. Neither do friendships or professional relationships alter the Taiwan public's perception of a hostile Beijing. These empirical results are consistent with the expectation that incidental contacts leave no imprints on individuals' cognitive experiences; only serious interactions that generate real acquaintance and understanding can moderate negative feelings.

The important theoretical implication is that contacts cannot be considered a general panacea for improving intergroup relationships. The moderating effect of contacts at the personal level is not transferable to a political entity when the latter is perceived as a suppressing agent. At the personal level, unless contacts can invoke genuine feeling and social bonds, frequent interactions do not have transformative effects on individuals' political views.

Such findings must bother, even alarm, the Beijing government. As indicated, Chinese leaders have learned that their coercive tactics can only backfire and yield undesirable outcomes that are contrary to their cause of unification. While continuing to pose a military threat to Taiwan, Beijing has adopted a softer approach in recent years by appealing, through generous economic concessions in cross-Straits trade and investments, to the island citizens. Beijing has also responded positively, albeit in a very limited form, to Taipei's request for participating in the international community (Wang, Lee, and



Yu 2011). The empirical evidence presented above seems to indicate that Beijing's "goodwill" actions are of little avail. Cross-Strait contacts, while close and intense, do not change the islanders' negative perception of Chinese government.

Previous studies show that China's unyielding stand on Taiwan's sovereignty underscores the island citizens' perception of a hostile Beijing government (Lee and Wang 2003; Wang forthcoming). As a result, any goodwill from Chinese leaders' conscious efforts has been countered by their tactics of diplomatic isolation and military threats. Economic concessions are viewed as ill-intended means to annex Taiwan. The prospect of economic integration actually raises concerns among Taiwan citizens, fearing that this integration may increase the island country's vulnerability. These findings thus call into question Beijing's strategy of promoting cross-Strait interactions without making substantive changes to its rigid policies towards Taiwan. Unless the Chinese government is mindful of Taiwan citizens' aspiration for dignity, respect, and equality in the international community, the island residents' negative views of China are not likely to be changed, regardless how frequent or intense cross-Strait contacts may be.

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1. The comments are summaries of focus group interviews conducted in Taiwan.

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