

Image of the Chinese People among Japanese Citizens: The Effect of Need for Cognition (NFC)¹

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Abstract

In recent years, the relationship between Japan and China has been shaky. Along with rising tensions in the region, polls in Japan constantly indicate negative attitudes toward China among Japanese citizens. Recognizing the dire situation surrounding Sino-Japanese relations, the main goals of the present research are twofold. First, this study examines Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people rather than their perceptions of China as a state. Second, it analyzes Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people by relying on the notion of Need for Cognition (NFC), which has been mainly developed in the field of psychology. Applying the notion of NFC, this study presents two testable hypotheses. First, one can hypothesize that Japanese citizens who display high NFC are less likely to develop negative opinions of the Chinese people, as they can engage in complex thought processes. Second, Japanese citizens with low NFC tend to develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people since low NFC individuals rely on heuristics or cues. A statistical analysis relying on survey data from Japan generally verifies these hypotheses. This study makes a contribution to the international relations literature by dissecting the psychological mechanism through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people. This article also contributes to the fields of social and political psychology by revealing how individuals perceive others in a highly conflictual environment. Finally, this study provides critical implications that aid in understanding current Sino-Japanese relations.

Keywords: China, Japan, Need for Cognition, Social/political psychology

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Introduction

In recent years, the international system has been going through drastic changes. One of the most important factors that has induced these changes is the dramatic growth of China. The Chinese economy has continued to grow over the past several decades, and China is now the second-biggest economy in the world (BBC 2011). Along with economic growth, the Chinese military has continued to expand its capabilities, which can seriously disrupt the power balance in the international system (Layne 2018; Brown 2022). As China has gained more power, its foreign policy has increasingly become more belligerent. China's assertive behavior in the region continues to fuel the "China threat" perspective around the world (Zheng et al. 2004; Machida 2023).

Witnessing China's dramatic growth, Japan has become more anxious about the changing power relations in the region, amplifying the tension between these two states (Calder 2006). One of the most critical issues that has strained Sino-Japanese relations is a territorial dispute. Both Japan and China claim sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands (or Diaoyu Dao as China calls them), and neither side is willing to make concessions on this matter. When the Japanese government nationalized these islands in 2012, the tension between Japan and China escalated dramatically to a dangerous level, critically derailing Sino-Japanese relations (Horiuchi 2014). Massive anti-Japan protests broke out in China (Wee and Duncan 2012). Following these protests, many Japanese companies decided to withdraw from China, undermining economic relations between these two states (Shirouzu and Takada 2014; Foley et al. 2018). China's stance on the territorial dispute continues to be more aggressive, while Japan has become more defensively postured, thus making the region highly volatile. Furthermore, China's actions toward Taiwan have also induced significant tension in the region. Perceiving Taiwan as part of its territory, China continues to escalate its behavior regarding this matter (Maizland and Fong 2025).

Witnessing the growing power of China, observers in Japan warn of the danger of being involved in the conflict over Taiwan (Sasakawa Peace Foundation 2024).²

In addition to geopolitical conflicts in the region, other issues can put significant strain on the relationship between Japan and China. For example, the concern over “overtourism” has been a serious problem in Japan (Burtis and Wise 2025). Although the benefit of inbound tourism is certainly important (Paidí et al. 2021), massive numbers of tourists from foreign countries disrupt Japanese society, hampering the lives of locals (Burtis and Wise 2025). Accounting for a high percentage of foreign tourists in Japan, the issue of Chinese tourists has stirred intense controversies in Japan (Hamamoto 2019; Kyodo News 2025). These issues contribute to negative narratives about China and the Chinese people among Japanese citizens.

Consequent to all of this, public opinion in Japan reflects the strained relationship between Japan and China. Although Japanese citizens were not always hostile to China previously (Genron NPO 2022), recent polls have consistently displayed negative attitudes toward China among the Japanese public (Silver et al. 2022; Reynolds 2023). The sudden outbreak of the global pandemic exacerbated the image of China, which also led to negative perceptions of the Chinese people. According to Silver et al. (2022), more than 50% of the respondents in Japan associated the Chinese people with negative images. The Japanese media reinforce these images of China, widely broadcasting negative aspects of China and the Chinese people, thus constantly exposing Japanese citizens to these negative discourses (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). These situations underline deep animosity toward China and the Chinese people among the Japanese public. Considering that public opinion can significantly affect the direction of foreign policy (Horiuchi 2014; Chu and Recchia 2022), the current condition poses a critical challenge for Tokyo and Beijing, and could

² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

potentially contribute to escalating tensions and even military conflict.

Recognizing the crucial relationship between public opinion and Sino-Japanese relations, this study examines the structure of Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Although numerous studies have examined public opinion toward China as a state among the Japanese population, the literature still suffers from several shortcomings. First, not many studies have systematically explored the Japanese public's attitudes toward the Chinese people as such, rather than toward the Chinese state or government. It is possible that individuals conceptually distinguish China as a state from the Chinese people (Hara and Shioda 2000, 5; Silver et al. 2022). While it may be inevitable that the Japanese public forms their opinions of China by relying on the media, there is a chance that Japanese citizens try to understand the Chinese people independently through various means. Therefore, it is important to systematically analyze individuals' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Second, very few studies have investigated Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people using a framework developed in the field of psychology.³ In shaping their attitudes toward the Chinese people, Japanese citizens are expected to go through several psychological processes. Since virtually no studies have systematically employed psychological frameworks to understand individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people, we have limited knowledge about the mechanisms through which individuals develop their opinions of the Chinese people.

Addressing the shortcomings of the existing literature, this study examines Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people by incorporating a framework developed in the field of psychology. The focus of the analysis is on the concept of Need for Cognition (NFC) (Cohen et al. 1955). Signifying the "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking," NFC is an important attribute that dictates individuals' cognitive motivation (Cacioppo and Petty 1982, 116). Scholars have

³ In the field of international relations, some studies have examined international conflict by employing social identity theory (Gries 2005; Sha 2021).

widely verified the critical impact of NFC in various domains (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996; Smith and Levin 1996; Nair and Ramnarayan 2000; Lin et al. 2006; See et al. 2009). Implications from these studies can be applied to account for Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people. One can expect that individuals with varying degrees of NFC try to understand the Chinese people differently. On the one hand, individuals high in NFC may engage in a complex thought process rather than adopting stereotypes that are widely diffused in society (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996; See et al. 2009). Consequently, Japanese citizens who demonstrate high NFC are less likely to hold negative perceptions of the Chinese people. On the other hand, however, individuals low in NFC are more likely to rely on cues and heuristics in developing their perceptions of the Chinese people (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993; Cacioppo et al. 1996; See et al. 2009; Peer and Gamliel 2012). Since the dominant discourse about China and the Chinese people in Japan is negative, one can expect that those low in NFC tend to associate the Chinese people with negative images.

To test these hypotheses, I conduct an original online survey targeting subjects (718 respondents) in Japan. Results from the online survey verify the hypotheses above. By incorporating the analytical framework from the field of psychology, this study contributes to the literature of international relations by revealing the mechanism through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people. Implications from this research are useful in comprehending recent dynamics surrounding China and the Chinese people in Japanese society. Beyond the practical implications in the region, this article also contributes to the fields of social and political psychology. Scholars in these fields have widely explored how individuals approach “out-groups” in various contexts (Tajfel 1974; Greene 1999; Howard 2000; Grunewald 2025). The case of Japan provides an optimal context in which researchers can effectively examine this issue since the Japanese

public largely considers China and the Chinese people as their out-groups. Therefore, findings obtained from the case of Japan are valuable in understanding human behavior in general in a highly conflictual environment.

This study proceeds as follows. First, it begins by exploring public opinion in Japan toward China and the Chinese people. The second section investigates the notion of NFC in the context of Sino-Japanese relations and presents the testable hypotheses. Third, I describe the research design that makes it possible to test the hypotheses. The fourth section implements the statistical analysis and reports the findings. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the findings and discussing possible directions for future studies.

Public Opinion Toward China and the Chinese People

Recognizing the importance of Sino-Japanese relations, polls have been regularly conducted to examine how people in each country feel about each other. Although xenophobia in Japanese society has emerged as a serious issue in recent years (Nagayoshi 2016), public opinion in Japan toward China has not always been hostile.⁴ According to polls conducted by Genron NPO (2022), the percentages of Japanese respondents who expressed negative views toward China were only 37.9% in 2005 and 36.4% in 2006, respectively. However, Japanese citizens' views toward China significantly worsened in 2007, with 66.3% of Japanese respondents indicating negative attitudes toward China in 2007 (Genron NPO 2022). Consistent with this tendency, polls in Japan show that Japanese citizens generally embrace negative feelings toward China (Akito and Hara 2000; Ito and Zhu 2008; Kamise et al. 2010). More recent surveys conducted by Genron NPO (2023) also indicate

4 I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

that more than 90% of respondents display negative perceptions of China.⁵ Regarding this point, Akito and Hara (2000) suggest that Japanese citizens generally have “stereotyped” perceptions of China since they have little knowledge of China. Similarly, Yasuno and Enomoto (2020) maintain that Chinese “soft power” fails to improve Japanese citizens’ perceptions of China.⁶

One of the main reasons why Japanese citizens’ attitudes toward China have dramatically worsened is that tension over the territorial disputes has dramatically escalated in recent years (Genron NPO 2012). Closely related to this issue, many respondents are worried that China may not respect international laws (Genron NPO 2022). As political relations between Tokyo and Beijing continue to deteriorate, public opinion in Japan toward China tends to remain negative, with few signs of improvement (Silver et al. 2022; Reynolds 2023).

These negative perceptions of China go hand in hand with hostile perceptions of the Chinese people. In their survey, Kamise et al. (2010) find that respondents in Japan mention that the Chinese people are quick-tempered (*kisho ga hageshi*) and have a strong sense of patriotism (*aikokushin ga tsuyoi*). Similarly, Shibuya et al. (2011) find that many Japanese citizens tend to perceive the Chinese people negatively.⁷ Also, analyzing how internet users in Japan describe the Chinese people on Twitter (now X), Taka (2015) shows that most of the tweets are negative toward the Chinese people. Finally, Stokes (2016) has noted that the majority of Japanese respondents in the Pew survey in 2016 tended to associate the Chinese people with negative stereotypes. These studies consistently suggest that Japanese citizens largely hold negative

5 Although public opinion in Japan is overwhelmingly negative toward China, surveys show that some of the respondents mention that they respect Chinese history and culture (Genron NPO 2022). In the same vein, some perceive China’s economic growth positively (Genron NPO 2022). Also, more than 70% of Japanese citizens consistently consider Sino-Japanese relations “important” (Genron NPO 2023). I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

6 Regarding the notion of “soft power,” see Nye (2004).

7 Yet, Shibuya et al. (2011) also find that some of those Japanese citizens who have directly interacted with the Chinese people indicate favorable attitudes toward them.

images of the Chinese people (Kamise et al. 2010; Shibuya et al. 2011; Taka 2015; Stokes 2016).

The media in Japan reinforce these negative perceptions of China and the Chinese people. Through the analysis of popular TV shows in Japan, Yamamoto and Hagiwara (2003) suggest that the media descriptions of China and the Chinese people are mostly negative, and that many viewers in Japan tend to think the Chinese often commit crimes. Similarly, Shibuya et al. (2011) maintain that those respondents in Japan who watch TV shows about foreigners in Japan tend to have negative images of China and the Chinese people. Although the media at times do cover positive aspects of China and the Chinese people (Ito and Zhu 2008), this coverage in Japan is largely outnumbered by negative content (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). Consequently, one can assume that the Japanese public has been consistently exposed to negative images of China and the Chinese people in Japanese society.

Along with the TV industry in Japan, the internet shows a similar tendency. In recent years, cyberspace in Japan has been full of negative content about China and South Korea (Tsuji 2008; Tsuji 2017). Those internet users who are called “net-uyoku” (“internet right-wingers”) display extremely hostile attitudes toward these countries (Tsuji 2008; Furuya 2016; Tsuji 2017). Anonymous bulletin boards such as 2-chan in Japan are the main arenas where such users express an extreme form of xenophobia (Fujioka and DeCook 2021; Kim 2017). Hostility toward foreign states can easily escalate in cyberspace, thus stirring controversies over the issue of “hate speech” in Japanese society (Yamaguchi 2013; Miyagi 2016). Although studies suggest that the overall number of “net-uyoku” is only a small minority (Tsuji 2008; Tsuji and Saito 2018), the presence of “net-uyoku” clearly marks the changing nature of Japanese society. Rising levels of xenophobia in cyberspace can have a larger impact than the actual numerical size of xenophobes (Kurahashi 2021).

The sudden outbreak of the global pandemic in 2019 further

exacerbated popular perceptions of China. One of the most controversial issues was the origin of COVID-19. Witnessing the dramatic surge of COVID-19, it was widely reported that it was artificially created in a Chinese lab (Blake 2023). Although this issue has not been officially settled, surveys indicate that the majority of Americans believe that the origin of COVID-19 was a lab leak (Blake 2023). The global pandemic critically fueled hostility toward China around the world (Silver et al. 2020). It was not a coincidence that the number of hate crimes against Asians, notably aimed at Chinese, dramatically increased in the United States (Han et al. 2023). These negative perceptions of China were not confined to the US, as polls around the world widely indicate highly negative views toward China (Silver et al. 2020).

As shown above, Japanese society is full of negative images of China and the Chinese people, as Japanese citizens are consistently exposed to these negative narratives about them (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). However, one needs to be cautious about the way individuals develop their attitudes; not all Japanese citizens equally develop hostile attitudes toward the Chinese people (Hara and Shioda 2000, 5). In theorizing the processes through which individuals develop their perceptions of the Chinese people, it is important to analyze one's ability to distinguish perceptions of China as a state and those of the Chinese people (*ibid.*). Generally speaking, individuals tend to associate country images with people who live in these countries (Willis 1968). Accordingly, it seems that those who are exposed to negative narratives of China and the Chinese people tend to assume that these views truly apply to the Chinese people (*ibid.*). Yet, there is a possibility that this process may not be as direct as one would suppose. Indeed, some Japanese citizens are capable of conceptually differentiating in their mindsets China as a state and the Chinese people (Hara and Shioda 2000, 5). Regarding this point, Silver et al. (2022) note that "... people are generally referring to the country's leadership or government and their actions, or its economy—not the people—when thinking about China. Views of China's government are not

automatically conflated with views of China's people."⁸ As this point shows, popular understanding of China and the Chinese people is not entirely straightforward. Just because Japanese citizens are deeply immersed in negative narratives about China and the Chinese people does not automatically mean that they develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people. Some people attempt to understand the Chinese people without relying on media images that are widely diffused in Japanese society.

Why do some people develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people while others do not? This is a critical question for understanding the structure of individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. Despite the importance of this matter, very few studies have addressed it. This study fills that gap in the literature. More specifically, the research presented in what follows systematically analyzes the process through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people by employing a framework developed in the field of psychology. The next section addresses this by incorporating the concept of NFC.

Need for Cognition (NFC) and Perceptions of Chinese People

The research in this article examines the process through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people. This study approaches this issue by incorporating the concept of NFC, which has been recognized as a critical concept in various fields. NFC refers to individuals' "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking" (Cacioppo and Petty 1982, 116). According to Cacioppo and Petty (1982), those individuals high in NFC enjoy activities that entail complex thought processes. Research shows that high NFC individuals tend to invest

⁸ Silver et al. (2022) suggest this point in relation to data from the United States and Australia. Still, this structure may be relevant in other cases including Japan.

more energy in seeking more information in their cognitive processes (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993). Consequently, high NFC individuals are equipped to deal with complex tasks (See et al. 2009). Similarly, studies have shown that these individuals tend to display more stable attitudes. Smith and Levin (1996) demonstrate that individuals with high NFC are more likely to maintain their viewpoints even if they are exposed to a different framing. In the same vein, Lin et al. (2006) show that high NFC individuals are less likely to be affected by mood in evaluating risk-taking behavior. These insights suggest that people high in NFC can develop their attitudes by engaging in complex thought processes independently (Smith and Levin 1996; Nair and Ramnarayan 2000; Lin et al. 2006).

Unlike those individuals who enjoy thinking, those low in NFC show different attributes. Since low NFC individuals would not invest effort in complex thought processes, they are more likely to rely on cues and heuristics (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993; Peer and Gamliel 2012). Low NFC individuals are more likely to develop their opinions by employing sources that may not be credible (Kozuh and Caks 2021; Borah 2022). Accordingly, their perceptions tend to be rather simplified since low NFC individuals shy away from complex thought processes (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; See et al. 2009; Wu et al. 2014). Because this is the way they try to comprehend issues, low NFC individuals tend to develop rather simplified perceptions consistent with their patterns of thinking (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; See et al. 2009; Wu et al. 2014).

Since NFC regulates individuals' thought processes, it can inevitably influence their characteristics. For example, studies have examined the relationship between NFC and individuals' personalities. Cacioppo and Petty (1982) show that low NFC individuals tend to be "close minded." Sadowski and Cogburn (1997) indicate that NFC is positively associated with items such as "openness to new experience" and "conscientiousness." Some analyze the relationship between NFC and individuals' ability to engage in innovative behavior. For instance, Wu et al. (2014) indicate that NFC is related to innovative behavior, while Olson et al. (1984)

demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between NFC and curiosity. Some apply the concept of NFC to analyze consumer behavior. Haugtvedt et al. (1992) maintain that individuals scoring high on NFC are more likely to engage in thorough evaluations of products compared to those low in NFC.

Beyond the impact of NFC on people's daily lives, it critically affects individuals' behavior in the political arena. Research finds that NFC is a distinct analytical concept separate from similar ideas such as political interest (Denny and Doyle 2008; Sohlberg 2016).⁹ While political interest refers to individuals' desire to learn about politics, NFC touches on their dispositions to actively engage in thought processes (Denny and Doyle 2008; Sohlberg 2016). As such, previous studies widely verify the applicability of NFC in accounting for political issues. Studying the 1984 presidential election in the United States, Ahlering (1987) suggests that those high in NFC are more likely to engage in the political process surrounding the election. Similarly, Sohlberg (2016) indicates that high NFC individuals tend to be more politically active. In the same vein, Arceneaux and Wielen (2013) show that NFC, along with the affective dimension, can significantly influence individuals' perceptions of political parties. Inevitably, the issue of NFC is highly relevant in analyzing people's attitudes toward political candidates. Fahey et al. (2020) maintain that the emotional dimension, rather than the cognitive one, played a critical role in determining voters' choices in the presidential election in 2016. According to Ganzach et al. (2019), voters' verbal skills, which are related to their cognitive abilities, significantly determine voters' choices. Similarly, Fording and Schram (2017) find that degrees of NFC were one of the most important factors that accounted for voters' preferences in the 2016 presidential election. These studies suggest that NFC significantly establishes an analytical framework through which individuals perceive their political realities (Fahey et al. 2020; Fording and Schram 2017; Ganzach et al. 2019).

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

These insights have critical implications for understanding the relationship between NFC and individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. For this purpose, it is critical to analyze how individuals with varying degrees of NFC differently process information. One can gain critical insights by looking at the issue of gender stereotypes. Stanciu and Vos (2017) show that gender stereotypes can lead to negative attitudes toward out-groups among those individuals low in NFC. Also, Olshan et al. (2021) find that women high in NFC are less likely to see themselves in a way consistent with the gender stereotypes that view women as more emotional than men. Similarly, studying how individuals perceive women's body images, Peck and Loken (2004) maintain that individuals high in NFC are not bound by the sense of beauty that traditional gender stereotypes endorse. These studies suggest important insights regarding the relationship between NFC and the way individuals deal with stereotypes; those high in NFC tend to be less susceptible to the stereotypes that are widespread in society (Peck and Loken 2004; Stanciu and Vos 2017; Olshan et al. 2021).

In analyzing the relationship between NFC and information processing, it is imperative to discuss studies that explore the issue of misinformation about COVID-19. Utilizing samples from Slovenia, Kozuh and Caks (2021) show that those low in NFC tend to trust news on social media regarding COVID-19, even though content on social media can be dubious. In the case of the United States, Borah (2022) indicates that individuals high in NFC are less susceptible to misinformation about COVID-19. In the same vein, Leding and Antonio (2019) maintain that high NFC individuals are more willing to make efforts to analyze the information at hand, thus making them less susceptible to misinformation. Finally, relying on samples from China, Su et al. (2021) suggest that high NFC individuals who use social media platforms hosted in foreign countries are less likely to embrace conspiracy theories.¹⁰ As shown above, scholars consistently underline

¹⁰ However, Ozimek et al. (2022) show that those high in NFC are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories found on social media. For this finding, they speculate that NFC are closely related to one's willingness to accept new experiences.

the significant impact of NFC in enhancing individuals' willingness to invest more effort to understand the issues they face (Leding and Antonio 2019; Kozuh and Caks 2021; Su et al. 2021; Borah 2022).

These insights from previous studies are useful in theorizing how NFC affects Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people. One of the critical points here is the way individuals process the information they receive. As mentioned above, Japanese citizens are frequently exposed to negative content about China and the Chinese people in Japanese society. Therefore, it is reasonable that Japanese citizens would subsequently adopt negative images of the Chinese people. Yet varying degrees of NFC can differently affect individuals' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Previous studies show that individuals high in NFC are less likely to be affected by stereotypes than those low in NFC (Peck and Loken 2004; Stanciu and Vos 2017; Olshan et al. 2021). Also, these high NFC individuals can maintain the attitudes they formed without being affected by others (Smith and Levin 1996; Nair and Ramnarayan 2000; Lin et al. 2006). Evidence suggests that those high in NFC can actively try to obtain further information relevant to the issue they encounter (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). Since high NFC individuals tend to enjoy the process of "effortful thinking," they seek to look for more information about the issues in question (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993). Consequently, those high in NFC can comprehend complex tasks that require more thinking (See et al. 2009).

Applying these insights to the issue of China's image, it is possible to capture how high NFC individuals perceive Chinese people. Since high NFC individuals are willing to engage in complex thought processes (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996; See et al. 2009), negative media images of China and the Chinese people do not automatically translate into hostile perceptions of the Chinese people. Even when they are exposed to negative media images of China and Chinese people, high NFC individuals do not assume they truly apply to Chinese people. Rather, they can engage in independent thought

processes that are separate from media discourses. High NFC individuals will attempt to develop their understanding of the Chinese people by actively seeking more information from various perspectives (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993). Consequently, one can hypothesize that Japanese citizens high in NFC are less likely to embrace negative characteristics of the Chinese people.

While individuals high in NFC can make their own judgments regarding the Chinese people, those low in NFC display different characteristics. Those Japanese citizens low in NFC tend to rely on cues from other people in forming their perceptions of China (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993; Peer and Gamliel 2012). Put differently, low NFC individuals are not willing to commit additional time and effort in trying to understand the Chinese people (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993); consequently, they tend to assume that negative media images of China and the Chinese people are indeed real. Since Japanese society has been full of negative images of China and Chinese people, those individuals low in NFC assume that the Chinese people display negative attributes consistent with negative media images. Accordingly, one can hypothesize that those individuals low in NFC are more likely to perceive Chinese people negatively, consistent with the negative information they often receive. As these two hypotheses above indicate, one can expect that individuals with different degrees of NFC have divergent attitudes toward the Chinese people. The next section discusses the research design that makes it possible to test these hypotheses.

Research Design

To test the hypotheses above, this study conducts an online survey targeting subjects in Japan. To implement a valid statistical analysis, it is necessary to collect a sample of sufficient size. For this purpose, this study utilizes the service provided by CrowdWorks, one of the most

popular crowdsourcing companies in Japan.¹¹ CrowdWorks has a pool of potential subjects who are willing to take online surveys for compensation. There are two criteria respondents must meet to take part in the online survey for this study. First, respondents are at least 20 years old. Second, they need to reside in Japan at the time of the survey. Those subjects who meet these two criteria were allowed to take the online survey. The survey—which had 718 respondents—was conducted in December 2023. The composition of the sample is relatively well-balanced. 56.2% of the respondents are female, while 43.88% are male. The percentage of respondents who are older than 40 years old is 49.5%. In terms of educational attainment, 54.05% of respondents have at least a bachelor's degree or higher. Even though these characteristics are not entirely representative of the population of Japan, this should not undermine the results of the statistical analyses. Studies indicate that convenience sampling does not distort the results of the statistical analysis (Weinberg et al. 2014; Coppock et al. 2018).¹² If the analysis detects a significant relationship among the variables of our interest, the goal of this study can be achieved.¹³

The Dependent Variable: Perceptions of the Chinese People

The main goal of this study is to examine how NFC affects Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people. Therefore, it is important to accurately measure how respondents in Japan feel about the Chinese people. For this purpose, I employ the following questions from the Pew Global Attitudes Project of Spring 2016 (Pew Research Center 2016):

Which of these characteristics do you associate with the Chinese? The first is (INSERT). Do you associate this with

¹¹ For details of the firm, see its website: <https://crowdworks.jp/>

¹² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

¹³ IRB approval #120123-1. The dataset includes a wide range of variables. Some of these variables are used for other research projects. The data for replication is available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VIWPMW>

the Chinese or not?

The Pew survey taps into respondents' perceptions of the Chinese people from various perspectives. Consistent with the Pew survey, this study tests Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people in terms of the following attributes:

- Violent
- Arrogant
- Dishonest¹⁴

Those attributes are inserted into the above statement to measure respondents' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Respondents are asked to choose one of the options: "Yes, associate" or "No, do not associate."¹⁵ I recoded respondents' answers so that those who associate the Chinese people with negative images are coded as 1 and otherwise 0. The main advantage of these questions is that they focus on the Chinese people rather than China as a state. Since this study hypothesizes that individuals with varying degrees of NFC respond differently to negative media images of China and the Chinese people, it is necessary to tap into these derogatory characteristics of the Chinese people.

Independent Variable: Need for Cognition (NFC)

To test the hypothesis above, it is necessary to capture the degrees of NFC that respondents display. Following Fording and Schram (2017), I utilize the following two questions:

- **Thinking is not my idea of fun.**¹⁶

¹⁴ This question was taken verbatim from Pew Global Attitudes Project Spring 2016 (Q28N). Although the Pew data provides several more options, I chose "violent" and "arrogant." Also, I modified "honest" into "dishonest" since this study measures how respondents perceive the Chinese people negatively.

¹⁵ In this study, respondents can also choose "don't know/refuse to answer." I combined the choices "don't know" and "refuse to answer" from the original options in the Pew survey. The option of "don't know/refuse to answer" was coded as a missing value.

¹⁶ Fording and Schram (2017) employ these questions from the January 2016 American National Election Study Pilot Survey (ANES). (nfc32).

· **I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.**¹⁷

For these two questions, respondents are asked to choose one of the following options: “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree.”¹⁸ I recoded these answers so that higher numbers signify high NFC among respondents. Consistent with the method adopted by Fording and Schram (2017), I created an index by adding answers to these two questions. Consequently, the higher the value of the index, the higher NFC tends to be among respondents.

Control Variables: Threat Perceptions

To obtain accurate estimates of the key independent variable, it is necessary to control for potentially confounding factors. Since the dependent variables are negative perceptions of the Chinese people, the analysis needs to consider threat perceptions among respondents. Research shows that threat perceptions significantly lead to prejudice toward immigrants (Quillian 1995; Scheepers et al. 2002; Riek et al. 2006). Similarly, previous studies indicate that threat perceptions significantly affect the way individuals make decisions in foreign affairs (Gordon and Arian 2001; Machida 2014; Machida 2020). Building upon these findings, this study analyzes two types of threat perceptions (Machida 2023). First, the analysis considers respondents’ perceptions of China as an economic threat. Observers note that the dramatic growth of the Chinese economy can threaten other states in the region (Calder 2006). Second, I examine Japanese citizens’ recognition of China as a military threat. Scholars widely argue that the growing capabilities of the Chinese military seriously destabilize international relations (Layne 2018; Brown 2022). These two variables, capturing threat perceptions of China, are essential in the statistical analysis.

¹⁷ January 2016 American National Election Study Pilot Survey (ANES). (nfc23)

¹⁸ All the survey questions in this study have an option of “don’t know/refuse to answer.” This option was coded as a missing value. This rule was applied to all the survey questions.

Controlling for economic and military threats, the analysis can isolate the impact of NFC on Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people. I recoded these variables so that higher numbers indicate more serious threat perceptions of China.

Demographic Variables

In addition to threat perceptions, it is necessary to consider demographic variables. First, I consider the respondents' gender. Research on immigrants suggests that the relationship between gender and bias against immigrants is rather complex (Ponce 2017; Kobayashi and Tanaka 2024). It is reasonable to assume that gender significantly affects respondents' perceptions of the Chinese people. Second, the analysis investigates the respondents' age. Evidence suggests that younger generations in Japan tend to be more favorable toward China than their older counterparts (Sonoda 2024). Therefore, one can hypothesize that older respondents are more likely to perceive Chinese people negatively. Third, it is necessary to control for educational attainment among respondents. Studies show that education boosts favorable attitudes toward immigrants and minorities (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Wodtke 2012; D'Hombres and Nunziata 2016; Erhart 2016).¹⁹ Applying the insights from these previous studies, one can hypothesize that Japanese citizens with higher educational attainment are less likely to have negative perceptions of the Chinese people. The next section implements a statistical analysis with the variables specified above.

Empirical Analysis

To test the hypotheses above, it is necessary to conduct a statistical analysis. The dependent variables in this study are dichotomous. To

¹⁹ However, Xie and Jin (2021) argue that the relationship between education and attitudes toward China is complex, interacting with degrees of development in each state.

cope with the binary nature of the dependent variables, I conduct a probit analysis. The result of the probit analysis is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
PROBIT ANALYSIS ON JAPANESE CITIZENS' IMAGE OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE

| Predictors | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| | Violent | Dishonest | Arrogant |
| Constant | -1.09* (0.42) | -0.58 (0.42) | -0.84* (0.41) |
| Gender | 0.22 (0.12) | 0.15 (0.12) | 0.07 (0.12) |
| Age | -0.002 (0.06) | 0.03 (0.06) | -0.10 (0.06) |
| Education | -0.03 (0.02) | -0.04 (0.02) | -0.03 (0.02) |
| China-Economic Threat | 0.24** (0.09) | 0.23* (0.09) | 0.38*** (0.09) |
| China-Military Threat | 0.46*** (0.09) | 0.27** (0.09) | 0.27** (0.09) |
| NFC | -0.20*** (0.05) | -0.13* (0.05) | -0.06 (0.05) |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.1222 | 0.0651 | 0.0822 |
| N | 479 | 467 | 509 |

Estimated by Stata 15. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.
Parentheses show standard errors.

First, the variable of interest is NFC. This variable indicates a statistically significant effect in Model 1 ($p < 0.001$) and Model 2 ($p < 0.05$). The negative coefficient of these variables suggests that high NFC individuals are less likely to report perceiving Chinese people as “violent” (Model 1) or “dishonest” (Model 2). Put differently, high NFC individuals are reluctant to perceive the Chinese people negatively in those two ways. These respondents with high NFC seem to be less susceptible to negative discourse about the Chinese people in Japanese

society. These results support the hypotheses above, highlighting the importance of NFC in shaping Japanese citizens' opinions of the Chinese people.

Unlike these variables above, NFC does not indicate a significant effect on the variable that captures respondents' perceptions of the Chinese people as "arrogant." One of the possible reasons for this result is that there have not been many discussions on Chinese people being "arrogant" in Japanese society. The focus of the Japanese media on China has been limited to a few aspects, including ample discussions on China being violent. This is especially the case regarding the issues surrounding the Senkaku Islands (Kyodo News 2023). Similarly, Japanese citizens have been widely exposed to the reports of China being "dishonest" (Hirata 2019; Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003). When the pandemic hit the world in 2020, it was widely reported that the Chinese government tried to hide the details surrounding the new virus (Feng and Cheng 2020). Amid the controversy over the origin of COVID-19 in the United States, Japanese citizens were deeply immersed in a similar discussion regarding the nature of the Chinese government (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2020). Accordingly, while NFC significantly reduces respondents' propensities to develop perceptions of the Chinese people as "violent" and "dishonest," NFC does not exert a significant effect on individuals' recognition of the Chinese people as "arrogant." Put differently, one cannot observe a statistically significant difference between respondents high in NFC and low in NFC regarding their perceptions of the Chinese people as "arrogant."

In addition to the main independent variable, it is important to analyze the impact of other variables. As expected, perceptions of China as an economic threat indicate a significant impact in all of the models ($p < 0.01$ in Model 1, $p < 0.05$ in Model 2, and $p < 0.001$ in Model 3). The direction of the coefficient is positive, suggesting that heightened levels of economic threat lead to more negative perceptions of the Chinese people. In the same vein, the variable capturing individuals' perceptions of China as a military threat displays a significant impact

($p < 0.001$ in Model 1, $p < 0.01$ in Model 2 and Model 3). The positive coefficient means that this variable contributes to negative attitudes toward the Chinese people. These results suggest that those Japanese citizens who perceive urgent military threats from China tend to develop more negative perceptions of the Chinese people. Consistent with findings from previous studies, threat perceptions are an essential element that is deeply related to individuals' attitudes toward others (Quillian 1995; Scheepers et al. 2002; Riek et al. 2006; Machida 2014; Machida 2020).

Unlike threat perceptions, none of the demographic variables show a statistically significant impact on the dependent variables. These variables, such as gender, age, and education, are not significantly related to Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people when NFC is considered in the models. Thus, overall, the analysis verifies that NFC is more important than demographic variables in determining respondents' attitudes toward the Chinese people, thereby underlining the importance of NFC in shaping individuals' perceptions in this regard.

Conclusion

The political relations between Japan and China have long been under strain. As China gains more power in the international system, its behavior in East Asia is increasingly becoming more belligerent. Consequently, the political tension between Japan and China has dramatically escalated (Layne 2018; Brown 2022). Along with the rising tension, the media in Japan have widely broadcast negative images of China and the Chinese people (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). Inevitably, negative Japanese public attitudes toward China have been exacerbated. Polls in Japan have consistently indicated highly hostile opinions of China and the Chinese people (Silver et al. 2022; Reynolds 2023).

Recognizing the dire picture surrounding the relationship between

Japan and China, the research in this article has pursued two goals. First, I have systematically analyzed Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people, rather than China as a state. Since most of the existing studies investigate Japanese citizens' attitudes toward China, this study has specifically investigated how the Japanese public develops its perceptions of the Chinese people. It is possible that some Japanese citizens form their perceptions of Chinese people independently without relying on the negative media images of China and the Chinese people. Second, this study has addressed this research question by incorporating the notion of NFC, which has mainly been developed in the field of psychology. Representing individuals' "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking," NFC is widely shown to influence individuals' attitudes and behavior in different fields (Cacioppo and Petty 1982, 116). By employing the notion of NFC, this work has dissected the mechanisms through which individuals establish their attitudes toward the Chinese people.

The statistical analysis relying on the survey data in Japan has revealed two main findings. First, NFC significantly reduces respondents' tendencies to recognize the Chinese people as "violent." Those individuals with high NFC are less likely to perceive the Chinese people as "violent." Second, the analysis has shown that those individuals with high NFC are less likely to recognize the Chinese people as "dishonest." These results have verified the importance of NFC in shaping individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. High NFC individuals seem to be more circumspect about accepting negative media images of Chinese people. One can speculate that high NFC activates critical thinking among individuals, and this subsequently serves as an antidote to negative media images. Accordingly, even in a situation where negative discourses of China and the Chinese people are dominant, it is possible that individuals who demonstrate high NFC can develop their understanding of Chinese people without taking cues from the media.

These findings make an important contribution to the international relations literature. Although few studies have incorporated the concept of NFC in analyzing Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese

people, this article has demonstrated the critical importance of NFC in individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. Furthermore, findings from this study generate important implications in the fields of social and political psychology. The analysis has revealed how cognitive ability matters in understanding others in a highly conflictual environment. These contributions are important in comprehending human behavior in various contexts.

Lessons from this study are useful in understanding group dynamics in Japanese society. Observers note that xenophobia has been steadily rising in Japanese society. In the same vein, the problem of "hate speech" against foreigners has emerged as a serious problem that requires attention in Japanese society (Yamaguchi 2013; Miyagi 2016). Inevitably, hostility against the Chinese people will continue to grow as China gains further strength in the region. Given these situations, it is imperative to accurately understand the structure of Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people. The analytical framework in this study, incorporating the concept of NFC, is conducive to analyzing how Japanese citizens behave vis-à-vis the Chinese people.

While this study generates important findings, it still has some limitations. One of the limitations is that this study did not control for specific situations where Japanese citizens perceive the Chinese people. For instance, concerns about territorial disputes may significantly affect the way Japanese citizens approach the Chinese people. Given the gravity of this issue, even those with high NFC may develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people if they perceive an imminent threat from China due to a territorial dispute. Therefore, future studies need to analyze how NFC can shape individuals' perceptions under these types of intense circumstances. More specifically, survey experiments that can manipulate different scenarios may more effectively analyze this issue. Since the critical importance of NFC is demonstrated, it is necessary to systematically investigate its applicability in different contexts.

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