Stereotypes of African Americans and Media Use Among Chinese High School Students

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Little research has examined stereotypes of American racial minorities held by people living abroad. This study attempts to fill this gap by surveying Chinese high school students to find out their stereotypes of African Americans, their sources of information about Americans in general, and whether stereotypes were related to media use. The results were mixed: Use of Chinese media sources led to positive stereotypes of African Americans, and use of American media sources led to negative stereotypes. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

KEYTERMS African Americans, China, media use, stereotyping

Recent studies have shown that American racial minorities, for the most part, continue to be negatively stereotyped by American Whites (e.g., Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002), and that the media are partly to blame (Fujoka, 1999; Gilens, 1996; Rada, 2000). Although there has been some improvement in portrayals of racial minorities in television news and entertainment, the overall picture is still either that racial minorities are absent, or that they are negatively portrayed (Greenberg et al., 2002). The link that researchers have found between media use and negative...
stereotypes of racial minorities is not surprising, given a number of theories that explain how audiences can vicariously learn perceptions and behaviors from the media, particularly when direct learning from real-world experience such as personal contact, is lacking (Bandura, 1986; Gerbner, 1973; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994).

Interestingly, not much is known about the stereotypes of American racial minorities in other countries. There are a number of studies about stereotypes of Americans (presumably White Americans) abroad (e.g., Defleur & DeFleur, 2003; Kohut & Stockes, 2006). These studies show that, in general, Americans are perceived negatively in most countries, and that the American government is even perceived more negatively than Americans. However, there are no studies that explicitly measure foreign stereotypes of American racial minorities—a glaring omission considering the increasing globalization of American business, education, and diplomacy (Ferleger & Mandle, 2000; Friedman, 2006; Gerdes, 2006), and the increased numbers of American racial minorities involved in these activities (e.g., Friedman, 2006). It is not unreasonable to expect increased interaction between American racial minorities and people abroad, or between American racial minorities and foreign visitors in the United States. It would therefore be instructive and useful to know how non-White Americans are perceived (e.g., stereotyped) by non-Americans, because these stereotypes may influence behavioral interactions (Allport, 1954; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Also, we need to know whether theories of vicarious learning used as explanations of media effects on stereotypes in the United States apply to non-U.S. audiences.

This study analyzes stereotypes of African Americans held by Chinese high school students and how these stereotypes might be influenced by use of American and Chinese media and by personal contact. We chose China because almost one fourth of the world’s population is in China. Also, China has attracted worldwide attention with decades of steady economic growth, which has resulted in increasing its political influence in world affairs. More media contents from foreign countries, especially from western countries such as the United States, are available in China today (Wang & Chang, 1996), resulting in an increasing diversity in both media form and media content.

We studied Chinese high school students because, compared with college students, they are in an earlier stage of the socialization process and are therefore more likely to be affected by the media (Bandura, 1986). We examined these students’ stereotypes of African Americans because content analyses reveal that African Americans have been the most prominent racial minority group depicted by the media, in comparison to Latinos and Asian Americans (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2002). We ask the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the stereotypes of African Americans held by Chinese high school students, and how do these stereotypes compare to their stereotypes of Americans in general and the American government?
RQ2: What American and Chinese information sources do Chinese high school students use to learn about Americans in general?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stereotypes

Stereotypes were first defined by Lippman (1922) as “pictures in our heads.” These pictures are cognitive moulds that reproduce mental models of people of the same social category. Later Allport (1954) refined the definition by extending the mental models to overgeneralized beliefs. Tajfel (1981) pointed out that stereotypes were also social products, serving such functions as making sense of the world by simplifying or systematizing information, and protecting perceivers’ value structures. Because humans have limited capacity to deal with incoming information (Lang & Friestad, 1993), they form stereotypes to reduce the cognitive burden of dealing with a complex world (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Therefore, stereotypes serve as explanations for events and justifications for established institutions and social structures. As social products, stereotypes can be formed from information provided by social agents such as the mass media (Stangor & Schaller, 2000).

Stereotypes of African Americans and African Americans in the Media

African Americans have long been negatively stereotyped in the United States (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969; Katz & Braly, 1933; Wilson, 1996). Although African American stereotypes have become less negative over time, African Americans are still perceived negatively in comparison to White Americans (Madon et al., 2001).

Greenberg et al. (2002) conducted a comprehensive summary of African American portrayals in the media. Reviewing 30 years of studies of minorities and mass media, they found that African Americans had more presence in the media than any other minority group. However, their review showed that greater representation did not necessarily mean better images. African Americans were generally portrayed negatively across such television programming genres as prime-time television, advertising, and television news. In early years of fictional entertainment television, for example, African Americans were often portrayed as “servants,” “overweight mamies,” and “buffoons.” Very seldom were they shown as professionals. These oversimplified portrayals and the consequent stereotypes of Blacks as “poor,” “lazy,” “unemployable,” “aggressive,” and “ignorant” prevailed into the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, Blacks appeared in fewer professional characterizations than their White counterparts although in the criminal justice system, they were overrepresented as police officers. African Americans had frequent
appearances in television news, especially in crime-related reports (Greenberg et al., 2002). They were overrepresented as suspects and perpetrators in news stories (Jamieson, 1992; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981), and oftentimes, they were depicted as “nameless,” “restrained,” “disheveled,” and “menacing” (Jamieson, 1992).

According to Greenberg et al. (2002), African Americans appeared in magazine advertisements from the 1940s to the mid 1960s as entertainers, athletes, and servants. Their images improved in the late 1960s as a result of pressure from Black civil rights groups. Except for an increase in their presence in advertising, Greenberg et al. (2002) did not report any significant trend in the portrayals of African Americans in advertising.

Several studies (e.g., Manatu, 2003; Stewart, 2005) have described various “negative” depictions of African Americans in movies. Manatu (2003), for example, has noted that Black females have traditionally been “devalued” and depicted as highly “sexual.” Additionally, Jones (1996) suggested that movies in the mid-1990s (e.g., *Boyz N the Hood, New Jack City*) portrayed African Americans as “ghettocentric.”

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory explains how people form their values and beliefs by observing and modeling the behaviors and attitudes of others in their environment. Learning occurs when observed events are readily accessible, simple, repeated, and perceived to be functional. Because most Chinese have limited opportunities for direct contact with African Americans, it is easier for them to observe the portrayals of African Americans in the media and to form their perceptions according to information from these portrayals, rather than to seek out information from personal contact.

Formation of Stereotypes Through Interpersonal and Mass-Mediated Intergroup Contact

Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis suggests that frequent contact with members of an outgroup can lead to the use of more complex dimensions in evaluating outgroup members. Hence, more contact with outgroup members can change initial negative stereotypes to positive ones. When direct contact is lacking, the mass media serve as important agents in the formation of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1973; Gerbner et al., 1994) proposes that frequency of exposure to TV messages influences audience perceptions of the “real world.” Research in the United States (e.g., Gilens, 1996; Rada, 2000) and abroad (Tan, Li, & Simpson, 1986; Wiedmann, 1984) show results consistent with the proposition that the frequency of TV use influences stereotypes of social groups.
VICARIOUS INTERGROUP CONTACT

Some studies have integrated the contact and cultivation theories to explain how vicarious intergroup contact (e.g., as portrayed in television) can shape racial stereotypes. Fujioka (1999) studied frequency of vicarious contact with African Americans via television exposure and viewers’ stereotypes of African Americans. Using samples of Japanese respondents living in Japan and White American respondents living in the United States, she found that the frequency of TV-mediated vicarious contact with African Americans did not significantly affect both groups’ stereotypes of African Americans. However, for the Japanese sample, the frequency of perceived positive portrayals led to more positive stereotyping of African Americans. She concluded that perceived valence of portrayals (positive or negative) is a more powerful predictor of stereotyping than frequency of total exposure.

Para-Social Contact

Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2005) developed a parasocial contact hypothesis (PCH) to explain that parasocial interaction with minority TV characters can lead to a reduction of prejudices against such characters. Parasocial interaction proposes that consumers of mass media develop intimate and friendly relationships with media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956). According to Schiappa et al. (2005), “if people process mass-mediated parasocial interaction in a manner similar to interpersonal interaction, then the socially beneficial functions of intergroup contact may result from parasocial contact” (p. 92). These authors found in three studies that respondents’ parasocial contact with minority TV characters (i.e., gay men and a transvestite) decreased prejudices against such characters (Schiappa et al., 2005).

Vicarious and parasocial intergroup contact theories can be applied to analyze how TV audiences may live vicariously through the experiences of a media character whom they perceive as part of their ingroup. Frequent and positive parasocial (e.g., via television) interaction between an ingroup member and outgroup members may enhance positive social perceptions (e.g., stereotypes) of outgroup members. In the present study, for instance, if Chinese audiences live vicariously through the experiences of Yao Ming, the Chinese National Basketball Association star whose contact situations with his mostly African American teammates are generally “positive” (e.g., cooperation, mutual dependence), then such vicarious experiences may enhance parasocial relationships with African Americans and promote positive stereotypes of them.

Media Availability and Use in China

With rapid economic development and with entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), China has significantly increased foreign media
availability in the past 10 years. Fulfilling its WTO commitments, China now allows 20 foreign films for theatrical release each year, of which 14–16 are usually from the United States (Miller, 2007). Recent American movie hits in China include “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,” “Star Wars Episode III,” “Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” “Superman Returns,” “Poseidon,” and “Spider-Man” (People’s Daily Online, 2005).

To meet their demand for American television and movies, many Chinese have turned to legal (the Internet) and illegal (pirated DVDs) sources. A 2006 survey by the China Internet Network Information Center found that there are 137 million Internet users in China, second only to the United States. In 2007, a survey of 2,952 Chinese youth by the China Youth Daily Research Center and Sina News Center found that 81.4% said the Internet was their top entertainment choice, followed by television (65.6%; Miller, 2007).

According to a National Public Radio report (Sydell, 2008), more than 200 million Chinese have access to American television through the Internet. Virtually all American television programs can be accessed soon after they are shown in the United States, many with Chinese subtitles. A number of Chinese web sites, for example, show “The Office,” “Lost,” “The Riches,” “Cashmere Mafia,” “House,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” and “Prison Break.”

The Internet is fast becoming the medium of choice in China. A survey by the China Youth Daily and Sina (n = 5,674) showed that 84.1% said their lives would be affected if the Internet “disappeared”, compared to 23.1% if television disappeared (China.Org.cn, 2007). Other media are still used extensively by the Chinese. In a 2004 CVSC-Sofres Media survey of residents in 30 cities, 54% said they watched television everyday, 32% said they read a newspaper, and 35% said they listened to radio everyday (see Yuan, 2008).

Younger Chinese (born between 1974 and 1984) have stronger preferences for entertainment over information contents in all media compared to older Chinese (Dou, Wang, & Zhou, 2006).

Hypotheses

According to theories reviewed and content analyses which show that African Americans continue to be portrayed negatively in American media, we test the following hypotheses in our sample of Chinese high school students:

H1: Use of American print media is related to negative stereotyping of African Americans: The more print media are used for information about Americans, the more negative African American stereotypes will be.

H2: Use of American television is related to negative stereotypes of African Americans.

H3: Use of American movies is related to negative stereotypes of African Americans.
METHOD

Our sample consisted of 345 high school students from two high schools in China: one in a rural area (Donggang) and the other in an urban area (Beijing). The data from the two samples were merged for final analysis because t tests found no differences across areas. The high schools were selected to represent rural and urban high schools in China. Random selection of students from representative high schools was not feasible. Lists of students are extremely difficult to obtain. When available, release of these lists requires approvals by several school and community authorities. Students selected randomly from lists would be very difficult to reach. They would reside within a large geographic area and would have to be interviewed face-to-face since availability of phones is uneven. Therefore, purposive sampling of students in classes was the only feasible method of reaching high school students for our study.

Measures

STEREOTYPES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

A seven-point, 13-item semantic differential scale adapted from Smith (1991) and Tan, Fujioka, and Tan (1997) was used to measure stereotypes of “African Americans in general.” This scale consisted of 13 bipolar adjectives (e.g., violent/not violent, polite/not polite) in which negative poles were scored 1 and positive poles were scored 7. For purposes of comparison, respondents were also asked to evaluate “White Americans in general” and the “American government” across the same type of scales.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used specific information sources to know about Americans living in the United States. Responses were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = not very often, 4 = very often). The information sources included local Chinese television, local newspapers, local magazines, American movies, American books, American television, American DVD/VHS rented, American magazines, American newspapers, the Internet, teachers, parents, friends, and travel to the United States.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Participants were asked to provide demographic information, which included their age, gender, family household income, and whether they had ever traveled to the U.S. mainland.
Procedure

Questionnaires were developed in English and translated to Chinese by two doctoral students from China, using the back translation technique (see Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The questionnaires were then mailed in batches from the host university in the United States to Chinese research collaborators in China in May of 2006. Our Chinese collaborators obtained the cooperation of Chinese teachers in two high schools. The teachers distributed the self-administered questionnaires to the student respondents during class time. Students turned in completed questionnaires to their teachers, still in the classroom. Return rates were close to 100%. Students complied because teachers are generally respected authorities in China. The consent form, approved by a human subjects review board in the United States, told the students that participation was voluntary. The teachers collected the questionnaires and gave them to our Chinese collaborators who mailed them back to the authors in the United States. The surveys, along with responses to open-ended questions, were translated from Chinese to English by two Chinese doctoral students.

RESULTS

Demographics

Out of 345 participants, 52.4% (n = 181) were male, and 47.6% (n = 164) were female. The average age of our respondents was 17 years (99% were in the 10th grade, the equivalent of 11th grade in the United States). Among them, 42.1% came from families with a monthly family income of 1,500–3,000 RMB (U.S. $200 to $420), 36.1% came from families with less than 1500 RMB, and 21.8% came from those with more than 3000 RMB. According to two Chinese doctoral students in communication (co-authors of this article), family income of U.S. $200 to $420 can support a comfortable life in China.

Reliability of Measures

Respondents were asked to evaluate African Americans, White Americans, and the American government across identical semantic differential scales. Cronbach alphas were .60 for African American stereotypes; .71 for American government stereotypes; and .67 for White American stereotypes.

Factor Analysis

The 13 stereotype items for African Americans were subjected to a factor analysis, using the principal components method of extraction and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization to obtain a final solution. Three factors emerged. The first factor (explaining 25.30% of variance), included the
following items: rich, hedonic, arrogant, aggressive, open-minded, and intelligent. The second factor (explaining 21.80% of variance) included good morals, honest, and polite. The third factor (explaining 8.50% of variance) included beautiful, greedy, prejudiced, and violent.

RQ1: African American Stereotypes

Results of t tests revealed that African American stereotypes among Chinese high school students were generally more positive than either those of White Americans or those of the American government (see Table 1). Results also showed significant differences for all paired comparisons. The positive and negative ends of the scale were identified in previous studies (e.g., Smith, 1990) and validated for Chinese culture by two doctoral students from China (co-authors of this article). The exception was “Rich”, which is not necessarily a positive trait in China, given Confucian philosophy. On the positive side, African Americans compared with Americans in general were regarded as less “arrogant,” less “violent,” more “honest,” less “aggressive,” less “prejudiced,” less “hedonic” (pleasure-seeking), and less “greedy.” On the negative side, African Americans in comparison to Americans in general were perceived to be poorer, less “moral,” less “beautiful,” less “polite,” more “close-minded,” and less “intelligent.” Regarding the descriptor “beautiful,” there is evidence that “White” Western standards of beauty or physical attractiveness have been adopted in many Asian countries, including China (Gunning, 2002; Kaw, 1997), possibly as a consequence of images in Western media that are readily available in these countries. Our respondents may have been using these standards in perceiving African Americans as “not beautiful” in comparison to White Americans. These results show that Chinese stereotypes of African Americans diverge from American stereotypes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>African Americans</th>
<th>Americans</th>
<th>American government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>6.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrogant</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishonest</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor morals</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not beautiful</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impolite</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudiced</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure-seeking</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-minded</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>5.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greedy</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not intelligent</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>5.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of African Americans for several traits. Most notably, African Americans are perceived to be less violent and less aggressive in China than in the United States. On the other hand, stereotypes of African Americans in China and the United States showed some similarities. In both countries, African Americans were perceived to be less “intelligent” and less “moral” than Americans in general (e.g., Smith, 1990). The American government was perceived more negatively, compared with African Americans, for all traits except “poor,” “not intelligent,” and “not beautiful.”

RQ 2: Information Sources About Americans

As Table 2 shows, the most frequently mentioned sources of information about Americans were Chinese television (mean of 2.95 on a 5-point scale), Chinese newspapers (2.71), and Chinese magazines (2.71); followed by American movies (2.34) and the Internet (2.31). American television (1.72) was not a frequently mentioned source of information about Americans. Not surprisingly, considering the emphasis in Chinese culture on loyalty to the state and family, the sources rated most highly for realism (“How realistic or true to life is the information you get about Americans from . . .”) were Chinese newspapers (mean of 2.88 on a 5-point scale), Chinese television (2.79), Chinese magazines (2.77) and “your parents” (2.75). Other sources rated above the mid-point were, “Americans you have met” (2.59), American newspapers (2.57), travel to the United States (2.55) and the Internet (2.51). Very few respondents had traveled to the United States (1.4%). American movies (2.13) and American television (2.48) were rated as not very realistic portrayals of Americans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency of use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American movies</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American television</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese television</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese newspaper</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese magazines</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD/VHS rented</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your teachers</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American magazines</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internet</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your friends</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American newspapers</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your parents</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americans you have met</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel to United States</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2 Frequency of Use of Sources of Information About Americans
Tests of Hypotheses

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 predicted that use of American print media, television, and movies as sources of information about Americans is related to negative stereotypes of African Americans. Taking each stereotypical trait separately and each information source separately, frequency of use of American sources was consistently related to negative stereotypes. Correlational analysis shows that use of American movies was negatively related to the trait “violent” ($r = -.16, p < .01$; the higher the stereotype score, the more positive the stereotype rating; e.g., for violent, a higher score indicated less violent) and to “hedonic” ($r = -.09, p < .05$). Other negative relationships included books and “polite” ($r = -.11, p < .05$); DVD (movies) and arrogant ($r = -.13, p < .01$); television and greedy ($r = -.12, p < .05$); and television and intelligent ($r = -.15, p < .01$). Although the correlation coefficients are small, the direction is consistent: the more use of American media, particularly television and movies, the more negative the stereotype. Therefore, correlation analysis offers some support for H1, H2, and H3.

Interestingly, use of Chinese media was related to positive stereotypes of African Americans: Chinese television and “honest” ($r = .15, p < .01$); television and “moral” ($r = .15, p < .01$); television and “open-minded” ($r = .15, p < .01$); newspapers and “polite” ($r = .10, p < .05$); newspapers and “open-minded” ($r = .11, p < .05$); magazines and “honest” ($r = .12, p < .05$); magazines and “moral” ($r = .14, p < .01$). Although the correlation coefficients are small, the direction is consistent: The more Chinese media are used, the more positive the stereotypes of African Americans.

The results of the correlational analyses are confirmed with standard regressions on two of the three stereotype factors. Although none of the information source use factors predicted Factor 1 (rich, hedonic, arrogant, aggressive, open, intelligent), significant predictors were identified for Factors 2 (moral, honest, polite) and 3 (beautiful, greedy, prejudiced, violent).

Significant predictors for Factor 2 (moral, honest, polite) were age ($\beta = .13, p < .05$) and use of Chinese television, newspapers, and magazines ($\beta = .22, p < .01$), indicating that the older the respondents and the more frequently they used Chinese media as sources of information about Americans, the more positive their stereotypes of African Americans, $R^2 = .03, F(2, 316) = 5.63, p < .01$.

Factor 3 (beautiful, greedy, prejudiced, violent) was predicted (coefficients approaching significance) by use of American television, movies, and DVDs for information about Americans ($\beta = -.21, p = .07$), use of Chinese television, newspapers, and magazines for information about Americans ($\beta = .15, p = .08$) and personal contact with Americans ($\beta = -.23, p = .06$). These results indicate that there was a tendency for use of American television, movies and DVDs and personal contact with Americans
to predict negative stereotypes of African Americans whereas use of Chinese media predicted positive stereotypes.

DISCUSSION

These results can be explained by theories of vicarious learning and parasocial interaction. Our high school respondents used American and Chinese media as sources of information about Americans. Interpersonal contact with Americans, including African Americans, was limited. Therefore, as social learning predicts, we can expect respondents’ stereotypes of Americans in general and African Americans in particular to be influenced by movies, television, and the print media via processes of vicarious learning. The direction of influence is determined by media portrayals of African Americans. American media had a negative influence on stereotypes because, as previous research has shown, African Americans are still negatively portrayed in American media. On the other hand, Chinese media do not portray African Americans negatively. When African Americans are featured, they are usually shown as victims of poverty or protesting for civil rights, according to two Chinese doctoral students who are co-authors of this article. Among the most popular Chinese television programs are National Basketball Association games featuring the Houston Rockets. Yao Ming, a Chinese citizen and Houston Rockets star player, is immensely popular among the Chinese. Most of his team members are African American. As parasocial interaction theories predict, Chinese audiences will form positive perceptions about African Americans when they see a person they identify with (Yao Ming) interacting positively and cooperating with African Americans to pursue a common goal (victory). Therefore, use of Chinese media can be expected to predict positive stereotypes of African Americans.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We surveyed Chinese high school students to find out their stereotypes of African Americans, their sources of information about Americans in general, and whether stereotypes were related to media use. We found that their stereotypes of African Americans were generally more positive (less negative) than their stereotypes of Americans in general, which were less negative than their stereotypes of the American government. Chinese television, newspapers, and magazines were the most frequently used information sources about Americans, followed by American movies, the Internet, and American television. As predicted by theories of vicarious learning such as social learning theory and parasocial interaction, we found consistent though moderate to weak relationships between media use and African American stereotypes. Use of American media was consistently related to negative
stereotypes whereas use of Chinese media was related to positive stereotypes. These results can be explained by how African Americans are portrayed more negatively in American media and more positively in Chinese media.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that media portrayals of African Americans can influence stereotypes of African Americans in China. Both frequency and valence of portrayals affect stereotypes. Frequent exposure to negative portrayals (as in some American media) may lead to negative stereotypes while frequent exposure to positive portrayals (as in some Chinese media) may lead to positive stereotypes. These findings provide some validation of theories of media and stereotyping, often tested in the United States, in a foreign environment. Given the rapidly expanding reach of American media abroad through the internet and satellite transmission, future research can investigate how American media portrayals of Americans, including racial minorities, affect perceptions of these groups by foreign audiences. At least in China, we can conclude that media effects on stereotyping are consistent with theoretical predictions and observed effects in the United States. More attention should be given to the processes mediating these effects, such as foreign audience perceptions of the accuracy, realism, believability and functionality of American media contents. Also, there is a need to systematically analyze how Americans, including racial minorities, are portrayed in foreign media so that theoretical connections can be made between portrayals and social perceptions. And, an even more fundamental question is: Why are American media popular abroad?

This study has several limitations. We did not conduct a content analysis of Chinese and American media, but instead relied on respondents’ answers to the open-ended questions about media contents available in China. Future research should conduct content analyses of media sources available in China and should analyze whether there is congruence between contents and stereotypes. Because, as noted earlier, random sampling of high school students in China may not be feasible, we used convenience sampling, thereby affecting the generalizability of the findings across the target population nationwide. Finally, the reliabilities for African American stereotypes (.60) and White American stereotypes (.67) were relatively low, as is often the case when measures developed in the United States are translated and applied in another culture.

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