Does Trade Boost Soft Power? Experimental Evidence from Mexico and the US for the Gentle Commerce Hypothesis

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The notion that a country can boost its popularity among foreign mass publics—and thereby its global soft power—by increasing its cross-border trade flows holds a canonical place in the field of international relations. However, convincing evidence, and especially experimental evidence, of this alleged "gentle commerce" relationship is limited. We address this empirical gap by conducting three survey experiments, which we embedded in three different surveys administered in Mexico and the US. We hypothesize that cueing respondents about their country's exports to a named foreign country improves their opinions of that country. We further hypothesize that cueing respondents about their country's imports from a named foreign country will have a positive, though weaker, effect on their attitudes about that trading partner. We find strong support for the exports hypothesis, providing evidence of a mercantilist or "pop internationalist" logic to citizen thought. We find mixed support for the imports hypothesis: cues about imports have positive or null effects that depend on the country of origin. Overall, we provide experimental evidence for the gentle commerce claim.

"We want to sell you all kinds of stuff"
-- President Barack Obama to Chinese President Hu Jintao (Murphy 2011)

The notion that a country can boost its popularity among foreign mass publics by increasing its cross-border trade flows holds a canonical place in the field of international relations. It is a central implication in the "gentle commerce" and "liberal peace" claims that run from Enlightenment-era thinkers (Kant 1957 [1795]; Voltaire 1984 [1764]) to contemporary political scientists (Kleinberg and Fordham 2010; Russett and O'Neal 2001), and it is a core assertion of the literature on global soft power (Nye 2004). Separate bodies of theory, however, suggest that trade flows may have a null or even negative impact on how common citizens view a trading partner (Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2009; Pandya and Venkatesan 2015). In addition, empirical findings on trade's impact on public opinion toward foreign countries are mixed (Baker and Cupery 2013; Eichenauer, Fuchs, and Brückner 2021; Kleinberg and Fordham 2010), and experimental evidence is virtually absent. We contribute to this historied literature by testing microfoundational implications that are central to the gentle commerce claim. In particular, we address the following two questions: First, does trade with a foreign trading partner improve mass perceptions of that country, does it worsen them, or does it have no effect at all? Second, if trade flows do affect mass perceptions of a trading partner, though what channel do they do so?

In answer to the first question, we hypothesize that trade flows between country *A* and country *B* do indeed improve attitudes in *A* toward *B*. This assertion is informed by a mounting body of evidence that informs our "exports hypothesis" and answer to the second question: exports from *A* to *B* improve mass favorability in *A* toward *B* (Johnson 2018; Mutz 2021). We further state the "imports hypothesis": imports from country *B* to country *A* will have a positive

effect on mass favorability in *A* toward *B*, though we expect this effect will be weaker than the effect of exports (Nye 2004). We test these pre-registered hypotheses with three cueing experiments embedded in three different surveys of Mexican and US respondents. We randomly assigned respondents to different cues about trade with named trading partners. We then measured attitudes toward China and the US in Mexico and toward China and Great Britain in the US.

Across these dyads, we find strong support for the exports hypotheses. Cueing respondents about their country's export flows to China, Great Britain, or the US makes them more favorable toward that named trading partner. Citizens in both countries hold a mercantilist or "pop internationalist" logic when updating their opinions of a foreign country based on cues about dyadic trade flows (Krugman 1996). In contrast, we find mixed support for the imports hypothesis: cues about imports have positive effects for attitudes toward wealthy countries but null effects on attitudes toward China. That said, at no point do our cues about trade yield negative effects and, again, several yield positive effects, providing qualified evidence of the gentle commerce claim. Overall, ours is some of the first experimental evidence to support the gentle commerce claim.

Dyadic Trade Flows and Perceptions of Foreign Trading Partners

Do a country's international trade flows improve its image among mass publics abroad? A wide array of theoretical traditions provides competing answers to this question, either explicitly or by implication. We first describe two theoretical streams that answer this question with an emphatic "yes," then we describe others that are more skeptical.

Gentle Commerce and Soft Power

Certainly the most storied tradition on this question is the "gentle commerce" claim, famously articulated by Montesquieu: "commerce cures destructive prejudices … everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores" (Montesquieu 2002 [1768], 338; see also Voltaire 1984 [1764]; von Mises). Applied to the contemporary global trade regime, the gentle commerce claim holds that the material benefits derived from mutual exchange mitigate outgroup prejudices toward foreign countries and peoples (Kleinberg and Fordham 2010). Similar implications emerge from the "liberal peace" tradition, which asserts that international trade reduces interstate conflict and can even build a transborder sense of community (Deutsch 1957; Kant 1957 [1795]; Pinker 2003, 168; Russett and O'Neal 2001).

The literature on global soft power is even more direct in asserting that trade flows improve mass goodwill toward a trading partner. Specifically, this literature assumes that a country's exports build its popular support abroad (Nye 2004). From the perspective of individuals, in other words, the consumption of a country's imports is the channel through which their images of a foreign country change and improve. (Hence, we label this the "imports channel.") Foreign-made products, and especially foreign-made cultural goods and services, are ubiquitous in the consumption baskets of today's citizens, so consumption is a plausible means to better a country's brand. Indeed, a diplomatic and academic project that ranks countries by their presumed soft power, "Soft Power 30," assumes the effectiveness of imports by including a measure of a country's cultural and service-sector outflows in its index of a country's ability to attract and persuade in the global arena (McClory 2019).

Theoretical and Empirical Challenges

Still, theoretical reasons to doubt the gentle commerce claim are plentiful. Perhaps most obviously, the material effects of international trade are not universally positive. Trade

liberalization carries distributional consequences, creating groups of winners and of losers (Frieden 1991; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Stolper and Samuelson 1941). As a result, trade may not only fail to mitigate outgroup prejudice but it may actually deepen or create prejudices toward foreigners, especially among individuals whose livelihoods have been harmed by imports from a foreign trading partner. The rising resentment toward China in the US, seemingly due in part to Chinese imports, potentially illustrates this eventuality (Autor et al. 2020).

Another reason to doubt the gentle commerce claim comes from a set of perspectives that sees trade flows to be endogenous, rather than exogenous, to attitudes about foreign countries. A vast literature in the field of international business finds that individuals hold stereotypes about foreign countries that shape their consumer behavior (Elliott and Cameron 1994). All else equal, for instance, individuals prefer to buy products made in countries that are wealthy and that are culturally similar to their own (Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, and Hyder 2000), and global trade flows seem to follow these patterns (Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2009). In addition, a small literature on consumer animosity shows that consumer boycotts, spurred by exogenous shocks to perceptions of a foreign country, can create temporary changes in trade flows (Heilmann 2016; Pollins 1989).

A final challenge comes from research on the limits of human cognition. The claim that dyadic trade flows will boost attitudes toward a trading partner carries lofty expectations of individuals' cognitive abilities. Among other things, it assumes awareness of the source country of imported goods and/or awareness of the destination of exports from one's country. Some information on this front is available, since suppliers in many countries are required to apply "Made in …" labels to finished consumer goods, and many workers in export-oriented firms surely know the foreign destinations of the products they make. More normally, however,

citizens are largely unaware of made-in labels or draw faulty conclusions about the mix of countries-of-origin in their consumption baskets (Liefeld 2004; Pandya and Venkatesan 2015). Moreover, relatively few workers are employed by firms that export. In short, trade flows may be taking place over people's heads, such that they have little impact on attitudes toward trading partners.

Empirical research on trade flows and attitudes toward foreign countries has yielded equally ambivalent findings, partly because of an absence of causally identified research designs. Some scholars argue that trade flows improve attitudes (Baker and Cupery 2013), some find that trade flows polarize attitudes (Eichenauer, Fuchs, and Brückner 2021; Kleinberg and Fordham 2010), and still others claim that trade flows are endogenous (Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2009; Rose 2016). Nearly all use observational data with thereby inherently debatable causal identification strategies. Experimental tests are rare.

Humans as Intuitive Mercantilists

Despite this theoretical and empirical morass, we nonetheless argue and hypothesize that the gentle commerce claim holds—and that it does so through what we call the "exports channel." In particular, a growing collection of findings in different disciplines suggests that individuals are "intuitive mercantilists," meaning they "imput[e] to money value over-and-above the goods it can purchase" (Johnson 2018, 30). With respect to trade, this means that individuals tend to value their country's exports over what the country imports. They tend to see the sale of products to a foreign land as a competitive success, a source of national pride, and even evidence of national dominance in a global economy that they envision as zero-sum (Boyer and Petersen 2018; Mutz 2021, 68). Paul Krugman has labeled this logic "pop internationalism" (Krugman 1996). Politicians from the US to East Asia subsidize and celebrate their countries exports while

sometimes bemoaning imports and trade deficits as a failing or even as theft (Perry 2017). As an example, recall this paper's epigraph, in which President Barack Obama chose to celebrate the "stuff" that the US could sell to China rather than the deals that US consumers were getting by trading with China. As another example, the first modern European nation-states practiced mercantilism to the hilt (Mazzuca 2021).

For the most part, individuals adhere to mercantilist logic despite its internal contradictions and inaccuracies. In reality, exports are not a benefit but rather the price a country pays for imports: "… imports, not exports, are the purpose of trade…" (Krugman 1996, 120). The central gains from trade occur through the consumption/imports channel by lowering prices relative to quality (Irwin 2002). In addition, while individuals surmise that demand for exports creates jobs, exports actually create *certain* jobs rather than leading to a net increase in jobs.

Nonetheless, we hypothesize that mercantilism drives the relationship between dyadic trade flows and attitudes toward a trading partner. More specifically, we anticipate that informational cues about a country's exports improve attitudes toward the foreign destination of those exports. In addition, we hypothesize that these cues will have a stronger and more consistent positive effect on attitudes toward a trading partner than cues about imports from that trading partner. Still, given some evidence that individuals can recognize the consumer-channel gains from trade (Baker 2009), we do not entirely dismiss the possibility that cues about imports can have a positive effect. The following list labels and states are main hypotheses:

> *Exports hypothesis*: Cues about exports from country *A* to country *B* improve mass favorability in *A* toward *B*.
>
> *Imports hypothesis*: Cues about imports from country *B* to country *A* improve mass favorability in *A* toward *B*.
>
> *Intuitive mercantilist hypothesis*: The positive impact of cues about exports on favorability in *A* toward *B* will be greater than the positive impact of cues about imports.

Gentle commerce hypothesis: Any cues about trade flows between country *A* and country *B* improve attitudes in *A* toward *B*.

Data

We report results from three between-subjects survey experiments that test these hypotheses. Although details vary across the three, our recurring strategy is to manipulate brief informational cues about the nature of trade flows between the respondent's country and a named foreign trading partner country before measuring the respondent's opinion of that named country. Experiment 1 was administered in 2021 to an online sample of 3,817 US respondents. In this survey, we measured attitudes toward either China or Great Britain (GB). The remaining two experiments were administered in Mexico via face-to-face interviews of nationally-representative samples, thereby adhering to what remains the gold standard in terms of respondent attentiveness and population-representativeness (Heerwegh and Loosveldt 2008). Experiment 2, administered in 2023 on a sample of 1,011 respondents, measured Mexican respondents' attitudes toward China. Experiment 3, administered in 2018 on a sample of 1,206 respondents, gauged respondents' attitudes toward China and the US.[1]

Our three experiments thus cover four directed dyads: Mexico→China, Mexico→US, US→China, and US→GB. This is a trifling sample of the world's nearly 40,000 directed dyads, so these four are not meant to be representative of this universe. Instead, we selected these dyads for a different methodological reason as well as an idiographic reason. These foreign countries are relatively well-known to our respondents: one great-power rival and one culturally similar ally for our US respondents and two great powers who are also major trading partners for our Mexican respondents. As a result, attitudes toward these foreign countries might be well-formed,

[1] We obviously do not number and present these experiments chronologically. Instead, we start with the most convincing and comprehensive experimental design and move to the least useful one.

at least relative to attitudes toward other foreign countries, and beliefs about trade with these countries probably partially inform these attitudes. We have thus set up a most-difficult test of our hypotheses. If our treatments move these attitudes—especially with our brief and thus intentionally weak treatments—then we have particularly strong evidence for the relevant hypotheses. In addition, because of the size and geopolitical importance of China, the US, and Great Britain, we can draw some idiographic conclusions.

Experiment 1: US Attitudes toward China and Great Britain

We conducted experiment 1 online on a sample of 3,817 US adults. The respondents were part of the LUCID opt-in panel, responding via the Qualtrics platform. The outcome variable is a simple question that gauges attitudes toward either China or Great Britain: "Do you have a very good, good, bad, or very bad opinion of the China/Great Britain?"[2] The experimental design is 6 × 1 and depicted in table 1. We randomized the nature of the trade cue that the respondent received (an exports cue, an imports cue, or no cue) as well as the foreign country (China or GB) to which the cue and outcome question referred. The texts for the exports cues mention exports from the US to the foreign country, while those for the imports cues mention imports into the US from the foreign country. To give respondents a concrete understanding of what exports and imports between the country pairs are, both sets of cues provide the (truthful) example of smartphone and cellular phone parts. The wording differences are thus minor, allowing us to pit the exports and imports cues in a straightforward and easy-to-interpret horserace.

[2] This wording is copied from the Latinobarometer's battery of evaluations of foreign countries and is similar to that used by Pew Global Attitudes. The nation-state is formally called "United Kingdom," and "Great Britain" is not coterminous with it. We used Great Britain nonetheless on the presumption that this term is more recognizable and identifying of the relevant entity.

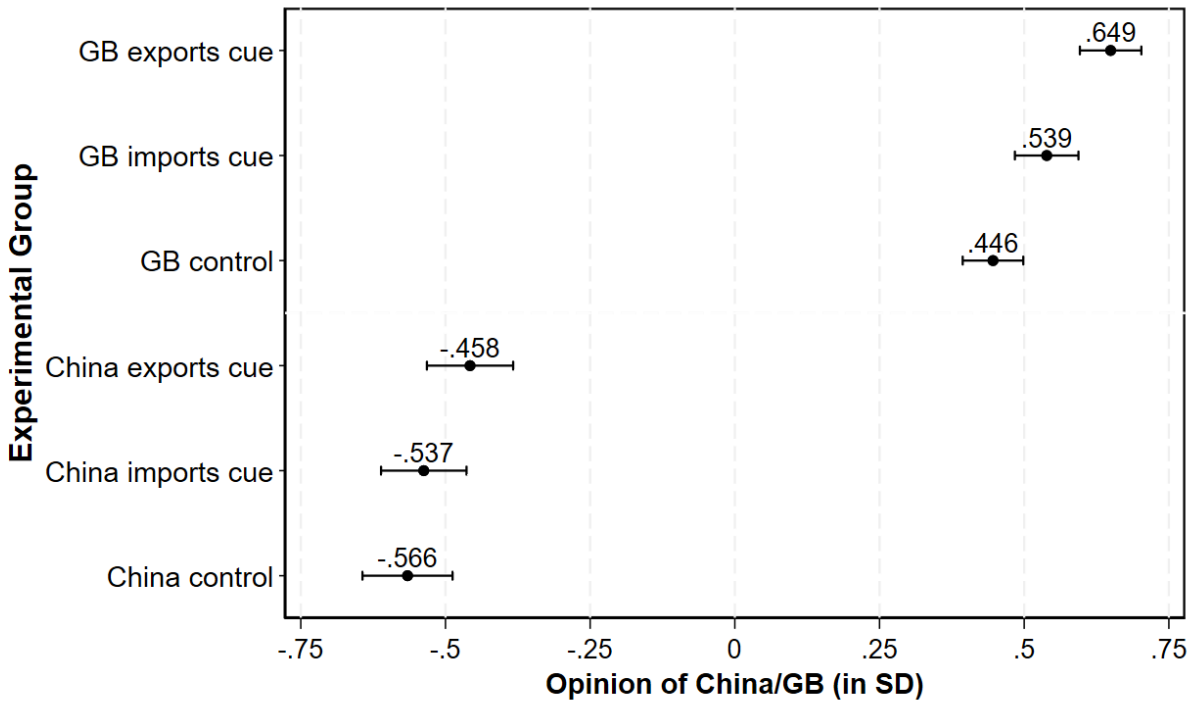
Table 1: Design of Experiment 1 (US 2021)

GB exports cue	"In the past few decades, exports to Great Britain from the US have increased. In other words, many products, such as parts for cars and smartphones, are made here in the US and then sold in Great Britain."
GB imports cue	"In the past few decades, imports from Great Britain have increased here in the US market. In other words, many products, such as parts for cars and smartphones, are made in Great Britain and then purchased by consumers here in the US."
GB control	No cue
China exports cue	"In the past few decades, exports to China from the US have increased. In other words, many products, such as parts for cars and smartphones, are made here in the US and then sold in China."
China imports cue	"In the past few decades, imports from China have increased here in the US market. In other words, many products, such as parts for cars and smartphones, are made in China and then purchased by consumers here in the US. "
China control	No cue

Experiment 1 provides strong support for the exports hypothesis. Figure 1 presents the results. The exports cues yielded statistically significant effects (relative to their respective controls) for both Great Britain and China subsamples. The exports effect on attitudes toward Great Britain is sizable at one-fifth of a standard deviation (+.203, p=.00), while the effect on attitudes toward China is smaller but still statistically significant (+.108, p=.05). Next, we find that the effect of imports interacts with trading partner. The imports cue yields a positive impact on attitudes toward Great Britain (+.093, p=.02), but the imports cue does not make respondents more favorable toward China (+.028, p=.61). Finally, this experiment provides support for the intuitive mercantilist hypothesis, at least in the case of Great Britain. Respondents exposed to the GB exports cue were more pro-GB than were respondents who were exposed to the GB imports

cue (+.110, p=.02). For the Chinese case, the difference of means between the exports and imports cue is also positive but not quite statistically significant (+.080, p=.13).[3] To summarize, we find strong support for the exports hypothesis, good support for the intuitive mercantilist hypothesis, and mixed support for the imports hypothesis.

Figure 1: Evaluations in the US of China and Great Britain by Experimental Group (Experiment 1): Means and 95 Percent Confidence Intervals



Experiment 2: Exports, Imports and Mexicans' Attitudes toward China

To maximize statistical power in the face of a relatively limited sample size of Mexicans (N=1,011), experiment 2 features only one trading partner, China. The experimental design is 4 × 1 and depicted in table 2. In this instance, we randomized the nature of four trade cues: exports, imports, general trade, and no cue. The exports and imports cues were worded almost

[3] The difference in means between GB control and China control is an effect estimate of trading partner. US respondents are a standard deviation (+1.012, p=.00) more favorable toward Great Britain than they are toward China. This finding is not surprising, and, because it is based on a mere manipulation of proper nouns, we cannot provide theoretical reasons for this difference. Still, we report it because unbiased effect estimates of foreign country name are rare.

equivalently to those from experiment 1, as we again (truthfully) referenced flows of car and smartphone parts between the home and the foreign country. This time, additionally, we added a cue about general trade flows, not specifying their direction as either imports or exports.

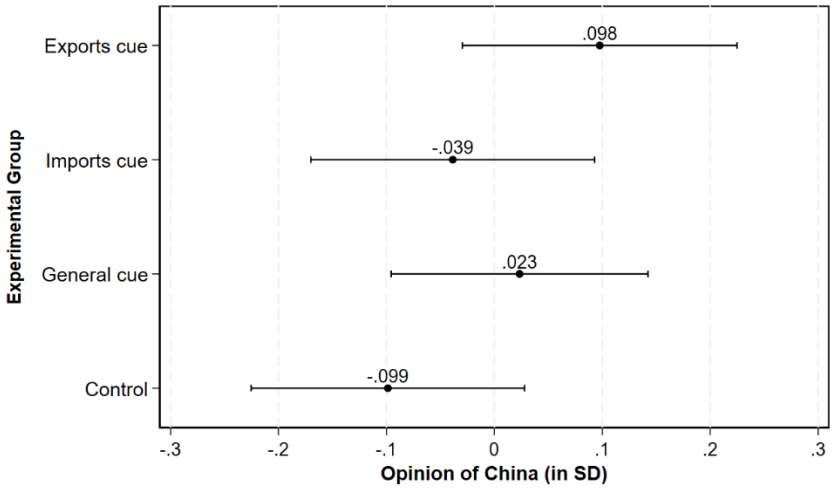
Table 2: Design of Experiment 2 (Mexico 2023)

Exports cue	"In recent decades, the quantity of Mexico's exports to China has increased there in the Chinese market. Thus, many products, such as car parts and smartphone parts, are made here in Mexico and purchased by consumers there in China."
Imports cue	"In recent decades, the quantity of imports from China to Mexico has increased here in the Mexican market. Thus, many products, such as car parts and smartphone parts, are made there in China and purchased by consumers here in Mexico."
General cue	"In recent decades, the quantity of products traded between Mexico and China has increased. Thus, many products, such as car parts and smartphone parts, are made in one of the countries and purchased by consumers in the other."
Control	No cue

Survey interviewers then immediately asked respondents the two outcome questions (in randomized order). Both of these load heavily on a latent dimension of support for China.[4] Figure 2 reports the results using an index we created from these two questions.

[4] Wordings of the two outcome questions were inspired by prior measures of soft power. Rather than copying them verbatim, however, we adapted them to a branching format, which, according to previous studies, has the most validity (Krosnick and Berent 1993). From Latinobarometer and Pew Global Attitudes: "Do you have a good or bad opinion about China? Regarding your answer, do you have a very good/bad, somewhat good/bad, or only slightly good/bad opinion about China?" From BBC Globescan: "Do you believe China is a good influence or a bad influence on the world? Regarding your answer, do you think China's influence in the world is very good/bad, somewhat good/bad, or only slightly good/bad?". The polychoric correlation between the two measures is +.70. We created an index using principal components analysis.

Figure 2: Mexicans' Evaluations of China by Experimental Group (Experiment 2): Means and 95 Percent Confidence Intervals



The exports cue yielded a large causal effect, boosting favorability toward China by nearly one-fifth of a standard deviation (+.196, p=.03) over that in the control group. In contrast, the imports cue had no statistically significant impact, moving respondents in only a small positive direction (+.060, p=.52). The direct difference in the effects of the exports and imports cues is relatively large, providing some support for the intuitive mercantilist hypothesis, but it does not quite reach statistical significance (+.135, p=.14). The effect of the general cue, which described bidirectional trade flows between the two countries, roughly splits the difference between the effects of the exports and imports cues. It caused respondents to improve their attitudes toward China (+.122, p=.17), but this effect is not as large as the effect of the exports cue and is not statistically significant at conventional levels.[5] Overall, our most confident conclusion is that cueing Mexicans about exports to China moves their attitudes toward China in a more favorable direction, whereas cueing them about imports from China does not.

[5] There are no statistically significant differences between the cues, although the difference between the exports and imports cues approaches it.

Experiment 3: Imports and Mexicans' Attitudes toward the US and China

Experiment 3 tests only the imports hypothesis, though it can decipher (as we did in experiment 1) whether the imports cue interacts with trading partner. Again, the outcome is a simple measure of attitudes toward a foreign country: "Do you have a very good, good, bad, or very bad opinion of the US/China?"[6] In this experiment, all respondents were asked about *both* countries, which differs from experiment 1 (in which each respondent was asked about one of two) and experiment 2 (one of one).

The experiment has a 2 × 2 × 2 design. Table 3 presents the two most substantive and important dimensions: the imports cue (presence or absence) and trading partner (US or China). In the imports cue text, we again illustrated the relevant trade flows by listing examples of actual imported products, though in this experiment we were more specific when listing products and thus varied them by trading partner. (This creates a bundled treatment problem that we discuss below.) The third dimension in the design is order of appearance. For half of respondents the US imports cue and US outcome question appeared toward the beginning of the questionnaire, with the Chinese imports cue and China question appearing toward the end. The orders were reversed for the other half. To clarify, outcome questions immediately followed their respective cues—the US question immediately followed the US cue and the China question immediately followed the

[6] Following best practices in survey wording design, these questions do not give respondents an "easy out," meaning an explicit "don't know" or "no response" option (Gilljam and Granberg 1993). Despite this, some respondents still refused to respond (8.4 percent to the USA question and 14.0 percent to the China question). We recode these to a "neutral" category in the middle of the scale: (1) very bad, (2) bad, (3) neutral, (4) good, (5) very good. (These are converted to standard deviations for presentation and analysis.) Dropping these respondents would risk a loss of experimental balance. Interestingly, the treatment more than halved (from 20 percent to 8.4 percent) the percentage of non-responses to the China question, an indication itself that information about imports is useful for some individuals in forming their judgements about a foreign country. The treatment had no effect on the rate of nonresponse in the US experiment. Thus, the informational effect of the imports cue exists for the lesser-known country but not for the better-known country.

China cue. For those in a control group, the outcome question immediately followed the spot where the cue would have been.

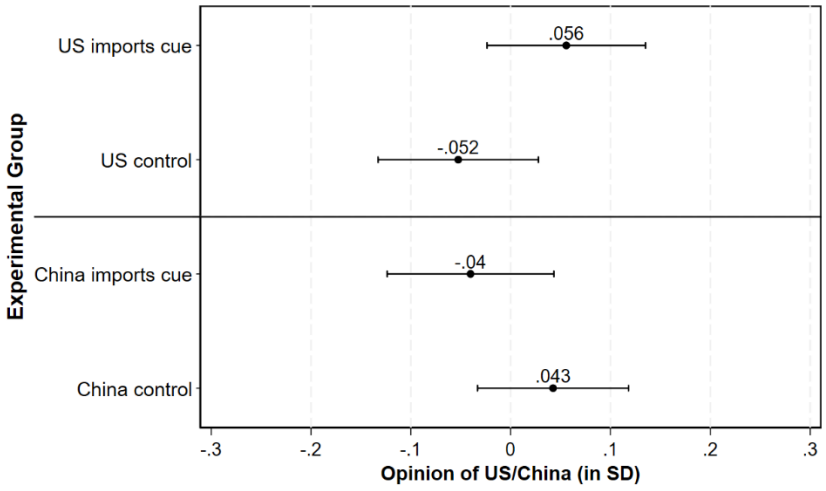
Table 3: Design of Experiment 3 (Mexico 2018)

Imports cue	Trading partner: US	Trading partner: China
Treatment	"Over the past few decades, the quantity of imports from the United States into Mexico has grown. So, many products, such as Nissan and Chevrolet cars, gasoline, and pork, are made in the United States and sold here in Mexico."	"Over the past few decades, the quantity of imports from China into Mexico has grown. So, many products, such as Lenovo computers and cell phones by Huawei and Apple, are made in China and sold here in Mexico."
Control	No cue	No cue

Figure 3 depicts the effect of the imports cues by trading partner. The US imports cue yielded a positive treatment effect on attitudes toward the US. The effect estimate is +.108 in standard deviations (p = .06). By contrast, the Chinese imports cue had a negative treatment effect of -.083 on attitudes toward China, though this difference is not statistically significant (p =.15).[7] The way in which the effect of the imports cue interacts with trading partner—null for China while positive for the wealthy country—is identical to that observed in experiment 1.

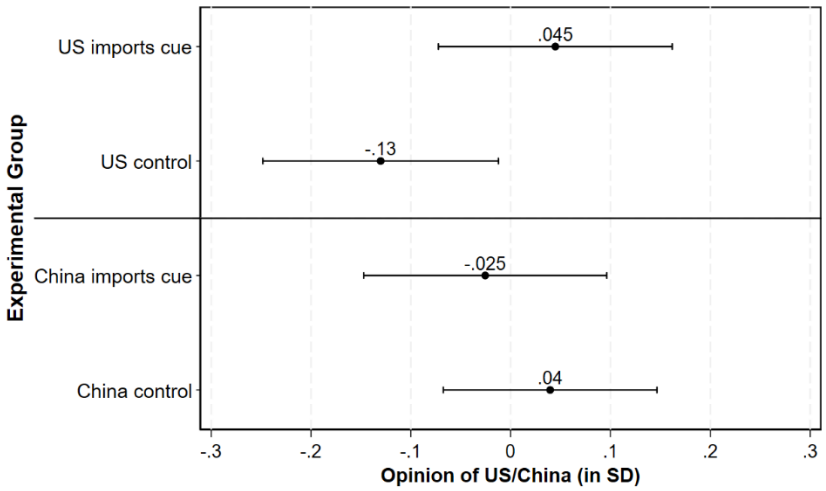
[7] It is important to note that these are two different outcome variables, both of which are standardized. One should not make, in other words, absolute comparisons between the US means and the China means

Figure 3: Mexicans' Evaluations of the US and China by Experimental Group (Experiment 1): Means and 95 Percent Confidence Intervals



We find even stronger support for the imports hypothesis for the US case when limiting our analysis to the outcome that appeared at the beginning of the questionnaire, which is the cleaner test. These treatment effects are not confounded by the earlier reference and/or cue to the other trading partner or by unknown consequences of the middle of the questionnaire, although this analysis cuts our effective sample in half. Figure 4 shows these results. The effect of the US imports cue on support for the US is now larger at +.175 (p=.04), whereas the treatment effect on attitudes toward China remains negative and statistically insignificant (-.065, p=.43).

Figure 4: Mexicans' Evaluations of the US and China (Experiment 1) by Experimental Group (First-Appearing Outcomes Only): Means and 95 Percent Confidence Intervals



To summarize, cueing Mexicans about US imports improves perceptions of the US, but cueing them about Chinese imports does not improve perceptions of China. In other words, elevating a country's imports to the top of a respondent's mind can better perceptions of that country, though it will not always do so. Empirical support for the imports hypothesis thus varies by trading partner. Further specifying which countries create this effect and why is beyond the scope of this paper—for now we merely have two proper nouns and thus can only make theoretical speculations (Przeworski and Teune 1970).[8]

Summary and Conclusion

Our survey experiments yield several valuable findings. Most importantly, cueing individuals in country *A* about their country's exports to a foreign country *B* improves the image

[8] The bundled treatment further complicates our ability to draw conclusions about the differences in effect sizes by trading partner. Also, we again have an unbiased effect estimate of trading partner: the difference in means between US control and China control when limiting observations to outcomes that appeared at the beginning. Our Mexican respondents were a half point (on the original five-point scale) more favorable toward China than the US (+.528, p=.00).

of *B* in *A* (relative to a control group that received no cue). This exports hypothesis is supported in three of three tests and in a set of diverse dyads: Mexico→China, US→China, and US→GB. Particularly compelling is the fact that a simple exports cue made US respondents more favorable toward China, a major rival that commands weak support in US public opinion polls. By contrast, cues about imports from *B* move the needle in *A* more inconsistently, with the effect depending on the country source of those imports. In particular, cues about imports from developed countries, namely, the US and Great Britain, did improve opinions of these countries in Mexico and the US, respectively. But cues about imports from a developing country, China, did not. They failed to do so on three different occasions across our sample countries.

This set of findings on the exports and imports hypotheses yields several important substantive conclusions. US and Mexican citizens are indeed intuitive mercantilists when it comes to trade and soft power. The effects of exports cues are larger than the effects of imports cues, even when the effects of imports cues are positive and statistically significant. Our findings show that the tendency to make the mercantilist "mistake" exists when individuals think about foreign trading partners—not just when thinking about trade itself as previous research has shown. They also suggest that this logic prevails in Mexico as well as the US. Boyer and Peterson (2018) suggest that mercantilist sentiment is perhaps a human universal. Our evidence from only Mexico and the US is far from proving a human universal, but it is compelling that we find evidence from two countries that are so economically and culturally distinct. [9]

Still, attitudes toward foreign countries are not wholly endogenous to information about trade flows. Country-of-origin moderates the effect of imports cues. The fact that we find null results when cueing respondents about imports from China—but not when cueing them about

[9] See Steinberg and Tan (2023) for evidence of this among Chinese respondents.

imports from rich countries—clearly suggests that baseline (pre-treatment) beliefs about countries are important. Again, parsing out precisely what these beliefs are is beyond the scope of this paper. We nonetheless speculate that this pattern of findings across our four imports cues may be driven by the widespread perception that goods from China are of poor or even dangerous quality, whereas goods from developed countries are of high quality and are symbols of sophistication (Midler 2009).

We conclude that our results support the gentle commerce hypothesis, though this is on balance and not unequivocally. Trade improves perceptions through the exports channel or through the imports channel when those imports are from a wealthy country. In addition, we are confident in claiming, at a minimum, that trade cues do not worsen attitudes about a foreign trading partner. Our experiments contain nine total statistical tests of differences between respondents treated with a trade cue and those in a relevant control group. None of these return statistically significant negative results. Even cueing US respondents about trade with China, their rival in a trade war, did not further sour them on this major trading partner. Despite polling amidst an alleged globalization backlash and despite the fact that many individuals are relative losers from economic globalization, we find no evidence that cues about dyadic trade flows sour Mexican or US respondents on their trading partners. The risk is low that trade might worsen perceptions of a trading partner and its soft power.

Our survey experiments thus yield the perhaps counterintuitive implication that the best way for a country to build its soft power among foreign mass publics is to lower trade barriers and buy their imports. Of course, whether attitudes respond to actual trade flows in this way is a question for further research.

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