'Threatening' China and US security: the international politics of identity

OLIVER TURNER

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

'Threatening' China and US security: the international politics of identity

OLIVER TURNER[*]

Abstract. China's increasing capabilities are a central focus of modern day US security concerns. The International Relations literature is a key forum for analyses of the so-called 'China threat' and yet it remains relatively quiet on the role of ideas in the construction and perpetuation of the dangers that country is understood to present. This article reveals that throughout history 'threats' from China towards the United States, rather than objectively verifiable phenomena, have always been social constructions of American design and thus more than calculations of material forces. Specifically, it argues that powerful and pervasive American representations of China have been repeatedly and purposefully responsible for creating a threatening identity. It also demonstrates that these representations have enabled and justified US China policies which themselves have reaffirmed the identities of both China and the United States, protecting the latter when seemingly threatened by the former. Three case studies from across the full duration of Sino-American relations expose the centrality of ideas to historical and contemporary understandings of China 'threats', and to the American foreign policies formulated in response.

Oliver Turner is a Research Associate at the Brooks World Poverty Institute at the University of Manchester. He is the author of *American Images of China: Identity, Power, Policy* (Routledge, forthcoming). He is interested in US foreign policy especially with regards newly influential global actors, as well as how American-led power steers the dynamics and future of the developing world.

Introduction

In March 2011 US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper informed the American Senate that, of all sovereign nations, China represented the most imminent 'mortal threat' to the United States. While China's intentions were not necessarily malicious, he argued, it had the capacity to present such a danger. Russia was also cited but quickly dismissed as Clapper observed that China's 'strategic nuclear weapons' arsenal in particular made it an issue of the foremost concern.[1] China's nuclear weapons stockpile is estimated at around 240 warheads. Russia's stands at around 12,000.[2] Yet, and despite the clear superiority of the latter's nuclear armament, Clapper repeatedly emphasised that it was China's capabilities and not its intent which were central in its elevation to such an extreme category of threat.

[1] CBS News, 'Do China, Russia pose "mortal threat" to us?', available at: {http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7359196n} accessed 11 April 2012.
[2] Robert Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, 'Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945–2010', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 66 (2010), pp. 77–83.

Director Clapper's assertions are reflective of the so-called China Threat Theory which now attracts considerable Western attention, especially within the United States. In the International Relations (IR) literature authors including John Mearsheimer examine US policy options towards a real or potential China threat. Mearsheimer argues that China's growth will almost inevitably cause tensions with the United States, presenting a 'considerable potential for war'.[3] Warren Cohen predicts that China will continue to 'brutaliz[e] the weak', and follow great powers of the past by seeking regional dominance before expanding its influence further.[4] Certainly, much of the recent literature is less foreboding of China's 'rise' and authors question the extent to which it endangers international security. Gordon Chang, for example, argues that China's economic model – and hence its capacity to become a true global superpower – is flawed.[5] Brown et al. are broadly positive about China's development, with engagement rather than containment the preferred US policy response.[6] Others reject the conflation of a 'rising' China with a 'dangerous' China.[7]

What protagonists of both sides of the argument demonstrate in equal measure, however, is the tendency to assume that a single physical reality about China can be determined. This aim of classifying China as a threat (or indeed a non-threat) is a legacy of the historical dominance within IR of the overtly positivist neorealist and neoliberal schools.[8] Positivist approaches to the discipline rely upon testable theory and empirical analysis with the expectation that the world can be definitively understood. The traditional influence of these approaches has precluded a more widespread appreciation of how, in fact, a single authoritative understanding about China is unachievable. The inherent contestability and subjectivity of judgments about that country was once noted by John King Fairbank who argued that '[a]t any given time the "truth" about China is in our heads'.[9] From this understanding the existence (or absence) of a China threat cannot be satisfactorily explained with reference to material forces alone. The 'threat' described by Director Clapper can never be dispassionately observed through assessments of an external world, as he seemingly claimed to be able to do.

The purpose of this article is not to speculate as to whether China 'is' or 'is not' a threat to the United States. It does not concern itself with China's nuclear arsenal nor dispute the existence and expansion of its capabilities, or the possibility of there being a cause of future violence. It argues that while the material realities of China are important, the nature and extent of their importance is, and has always been, regulated by ideas. Of course, the understanding that international affairs are guided by more than the distribution of state capabilities is not original; it has long been a

[3] John Mearsheimer, 'China's Unpeaceful Rise', *Current History,* 105:690 (2006), pp. 160–2.
[4] Warren Cohen, 'China's Rise in Historical Perspective', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30:4–5 (2007), pp. 683–704.
[5] Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (London: Arrow, 2002).
[6] Michael Brown, Owen Coté Jr, Sean Lynn-Jones, and Steven Miller (eds), *The Rise of China: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
[7] See, in particular, Peter Hays Gries, 'Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is the "China Threat" Inevitable?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 235–65; Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?', *International Security*, 30:2 (2005), pp. 7–45.
[8] Chengxin Pan, 'The "China Threat" in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 29 (2004), p. 305.
[9] John King Fairbank, *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese-American Relations* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), p. xiv.

primary contestation of the 'critical', or post-positivist, IR movement that the world is mutually constitutive of material and ideational forces.[10] Moreover, authors including Evelyn Goh emphasise the centrality of ideas within Sino-US relations and to the formulation of US China policy at key moments.[11] Chengxin Pan specifically examines the China 'threat' as a discursive construction and its importance to Washington's relations with Beijing.[12]

Beyond these important works the discipline remains relatively quiet on the salience of ideational forces in producing a fantasised China 'threat' and in enabling US policies in response.[13] It also broadly fails to explain how those policies themselves reinforce the understandings which make them possible in the first place. This is the arena of enquiry towards which the article is directed. It contributes to a small but growing literature which challenges the contours of the modern day China Threat Theory, exposing it as fundamentally flawed and even potentially dangerous. It does this by demonstrating that, in many respects, today's China 'threat' to US security conforms to those which have emerged before. It shows how, across the duration of Sino-US relations, China 'threats' have *always* emerged in part from representation and interpretation and thus how fears about that country today continue to be manufactured and engineered in a way not unique from those of the (sometimes distant) past. In late 2011 the Obama administration shifted its foreign policy focus from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Asia Pacific.[14] To a significant extent this 'pivot', as it is commonly described, is motivated by the growth of China. Accordingly, as increasing concentrations of US political, economic, and military recourses are diverted to the Asian region, American perceptions of China and their significance to the enactment of Washington's foreign policies there have once more become increasingly pertinent.

The first part of the article has two purposes. First, it explicates how it can be argued that the China 'threat' to US security is a subjective representation of American

[10] IR constructivists have been most active in this regard. See, for example, Alexander Wendt, S*ocial Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making*: *Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); Vendulka Kubálková, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (eds), *International Relations in a Constructed World* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

[11] Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the US Rapprochement With China, 1961–1974: From ''Red Menace'' to ''Tacit Ally''* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also Øystein Tunsjø, *US Taiwan Policy: Constructing the Triangle* (London: Routledge, 2008); Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1967); Christopher Jesperson, *American Images of China, 1931–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1996); Michael Hunt, David Shambaugh, Warren Cohen and Akira Iriye, *Mutual Images in US-China Relations*, Occasional Paper no. 32 (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program, 1988); Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Enquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Thomas Dorogi, *Tainted Perceptions: Liberal Democracy and American Popular Images of China* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2001).

[12] See Pan, '"China Threat"'; Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, forthcoming).

[13] Authors have afforded attention to US public opinion of China. However, it is consistently studied as a phenomenon discrete from, and secondary to (albeit somehow affecting), foreign policy, rather than as a force within the construction of China and the availability of policy options. See, for example, Leonard Kusnitz, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America's China Policy, 1949–1979* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: US Relations with China Since 1949* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), esp. pp. 86–90.

[14] See Hillary Clinton, 'America's Pacific century', *Foreign Policy* (November 2011), available at: {http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?page=full} accessed 12 April 2012.

society. It is explained that while the 'dangers' have an undeniable material base, China's capabilities are attributed ideas which produce a threatening identity regardless of Beijing's intentions. Second, it examines the significance of American representations to US China policy. It is asserted that particular discourses have always made true a threatening China and enabled and legitimised policy performances in response. It is also argued that those performances themselves have reaffirmed the identities of both China and the United States. As such, it is shown that US China policies function to protect the (equally imagined and socially constructed) American identity from which the 'threat' is produced. The second part of the article applies these arguments to three case studies: the mid-to-late nineteenth century when an influx of Chinese immigrants entered the United States; the early Cold War period following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC); and the modern day period when a 'rising' China is increasingly powerful and influential. These are the temporal moments at which 'dangers' from China to American security have been interpreted as the most immediate and acute. The article concludes with an overview of the findings and their implications for our understandings of, and potential approaches towards, the modern day China 'threat' to the United States.

Imagining China: the construction of threat and political possibility

In his analysis of the China Threat Theory Chengxin Pan argues that the 'threat' is an imagined construction of American observers.[15] Pan does not deny the importance of the PRC's capabilities but asserts that they appear threatening from understandings about the United States itself. '[T]here is no such thing as "Chinese reality" that can automatically speak for itself', Pan argues. '[T]o fully understand the US "China threat" argument, it is essential to recognize its autobiographical nature'.[16] The geographical territory of China, then, is not separate from or external to, American representations of it. Rather, it is actively constitutive of those representations.[17]

The analysis which follows demonstrates that China 'threats' to the United States have to some extent always been established and perpetuated through representation and discourse. Michel Foucault described discourse as 'the general domain of all statements', constituting either a group of individual statements or a regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements.[18] American discourse of China can therefore be manifest as disparate and single statements about that country or as collectives of related statements such as the China Threat Theory. Ultimately, American representations of China are discursive constructions of truths or realities about its existence.

The article draws in part from the work of David Campbell who suggests that dangers in the international realm are invariably threats to understandings about the self. 'The mere existence of an alternative mode of being', argues Campbell, 'the

---

[15] Pan, '"China Threat"', esp. pp. 310–13.
[16] Ibid., p. 313.
[17] Ibid., p. 306.
[18] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans A. M Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), p. 80.

presence of which exemplifies that different identities are possible ... is sometimes enough to produce the understanding of a threat.'[19] As a result, interpretations of global danger can be traced to the processes by which states are made foreign from one another through discourses of separation and difference.[20] In this analysis it is demonstrated that particular American discourses have historically made the US foreign from China. Case study one for example demonstrates that nineteenth-century racial discourses of non-white immigrant Chinese separated China from a United States largely defined by its presumed Caucasian foundations. In case study two we see that Cold War ideological discourses of communism distanced the PRC from the democratic-capitalist US. These types of discourses are shown to have constituted a 'specific sort of *boundary producing political performance*'.[21]

Across the history of Sino-US relations then when 'dangers' from China have emerged, they have always been perceived through the lens of American identity. In consequence, they have always existed as dangers *to* that identity. In this analysis it is argued that a key purpose of depicting China as a threat has been to protect components of American identity (primarily racial and ideological) deemed most fundamental to its being. As such, representations of a threatening China have most commonly been advanced by, and served the interests of, those who support actions to defend that identity. The case study analyses which follow reveal that this has included politicians and policymaking circles, such as those within the administration of President Harry Truman which implemented the Cold War containment of the PRC. It also exposes the complicity of other societal individuals and institutions including elements of the late nineteenth-century American media which supported restrictions against Chinese immigration to the western United States.

It is demonstrated that, twice before, this discursive process of separating China from the United States has resulted in a crisis of American identity. Crises of identity occur when the existing order is considered in danger of rupture. The prevailing authority is seen to be weakened and rhetoric over how to reassert the 'natural' identity intensifies.[22] Case studies one and two expose how such crises have previously emerged. These moments were characterised by perceived attacks upon core assumptions about what the United States was understood to be: fundamentally white in the late nineteenth century and democratic-capitalist in the early Cold War. Case study three shows that while today's China 'threat' to US security is yet to generate such a crisis, we must learn from those of the past to help avoid the types of consequences they have previously facilitated.

As Director Clapper unwittingly confirmed then the capabilities and intentions of a 'rising' China are only part of the story. International relations are driven by forces both material and ideational and the processes by which China is made foreign from, and potentially dangerous to, the United States are inseparable from the enactment of US China policy. This is because, to reaffirm, American discourses of China have never been produced objectively or in the absence of purpose or intent. Their dis-

---

[19] David Campbell, *Writing Security* (rev. edn, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 3, emphasis in original.
[20] Campbell, *Writing Security*, esp. chap. 4.
[21] Richard Ashley, 'Foreign Policy as Political Performance', *International Studies Notes*, 13 (1987), p. 51, emphasis in original.
[22] Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 13.

semination is a performance of power, however seemingly innocent or benign.[23] This is not to claim causal linkages between representation and foreign policy. Rather, it is to reveal the specific historical conditions within which policies have occurred, through an analysis of the political history of the production of truth.[24]

Accordingly, this analysis shifts from a concern with 'why' to 'how' questions. 'Why' questions assume that particular practices can happen by taking for granted the identities of the actors involved.[25] They assume, for instance, the availability of a range of policy options in Washington from the self-evident existence of a China threat. 'How' questions investigate the production of identity and the processes which ensure that particular practices can be enacted while others are precluded.[26] In this analysis they are concerned with how and why China 'threats' have come to exist, who has been responsible for their production and how those socially constructed dangers have established the necessary realities within which particular US foreign policies could legitimately be advanced.

US China policy, however, must not be narrowly conceived as a 'bridge' between two states.[27] In fact, it works on behalf of societal discourses about China to reassert the understandings of difference upon which it relies.[28] Rather than a final manifestation of representational processes, then, US China policy itself works to construct China's identity as well as that of the United States. As the case study analyses show, it perpetuates discursive difference through the rhetoric and actions (governmental acts, speeches, etc.) by which it is advanced and the reproduction of a China 'threat' continues. In such a way it constitutes the international 'inscription of foreignness', protecting American values and identity when seemingly threatened by that of China.[29] As Hixson asserts, '[f]oreign policy plays a profoundly significant role in the process of creating, affirming and disciplining conceptions of national identity', and the United States has always been especially dependent upon representational practices for understandings about its identity.[30]

In sum, this article advances three principal arguments. First, throughout history 'threats' from China towards the United States have never been explicable in terms of material forces alone. They have in part been fantasised, socially constructed products of American discourse. The physical contours of Sino-American relations have been given meaning by processes of representation so that China has repeatedly

---

[23] Michel Foucault, 'Prison Talk', in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 52. See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1979). Power in IR is now a widely contested concept. See, for example, Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization*, 59 (2005), pp. 39–75; Stefan Guzzini, 'The Use and Misuse of Power Analysis in International Theory', in Ronan Palan (ed.), *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[24] Michel Foucault, 'Power and Sex', in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 112.

[25] Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, p. 4.

[26] Ibid. For a discussion of 'why' and 'how' questions see Charles Cross, 'Explanation and the Theory of Questions', *Erkenntnis*, 34:2 (1991), pp. 237–60.

[27] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 61.

[28] Ibid., esp. chap. 2. See also Richard Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War', in James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 303–4.

[29] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. x.

[30] Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 8; Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 91. See also John Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International Institutionalization* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 218–9.

been made threatening no matter its intentions. Second, representations of China 'threats' have always been key to the enactment and justification of US foreign policies formulated in response. Specifically, they have framed the boundaries of political possibility so that certain policies could be enabled while potential alternatives could be discarded. Third, US China policies themselves have reaffirmed discourses of foreignness and the identities of both China and the United States, functioning to protect the American identity from which the 'threats' have been produced.

Research design

The data which informs this analysis is both primary and secondary and was included on the basis of its relative influence during each of the moments under review. Specifically, the American representations of China which appear were chosen either because they constitute discourses of difference which were more likely to have been absorbed by those in policymaking circles, and drawn from during policy implementation, or because they were advanced by policymakers themselves. For example, US newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* 'qualified' because of their relatively high circulations and because, broadly speaking, they represent publications of historical and contemporary standing. A geographically diverse collection of newspapers was utilised to negate regional bias. Other representations were similarly included because, to varying extents, they have occupied a clear presence within American society. In some cases the ideas about China they advance are shown to have been reflected directly within policy rhetoric of the time, demonstrating most profoundly how societal discourses have provided the rationale and legitimacy for policy. The governmental documents examined, meanwhile, are those which have been central to the enactment of US China policies. They represent articulations of Washington administrations or key individuals and groups in positions of influence at moments of policy development and implementation.

The sample of representations provided could never entirely escape query or criticism. Nonetheless, the purpose of interrogating comparatively more influential or 'politically prominent' ideas about China is to conduct an analysis most capable of exposing the significance of certain discourses to, and their inextricability from, US China policy. The argument, to confirm, is not that a cause and effect relationship between representations and policies can be determined, or that any given societal representations can be considered complicit within processes of policy implementation. It is that those which circulate among higher numbers of groups and institutions and which are more widely absorbed and reproduced over time are those which must be afforded more attention. This is because, as will be shown, it is possible to reveal how they have collectively permeated the policymaking process and helped create the realities in which the possibility of acts of US China policy have been introduced.

Case study one: the mid-to-late nineteenth-century China 'threat'

In 1784 the *Empress of China* left New York to become the first American ship to reach Canton. Between 1785 and 1800 an average of seven US ships per year

completed the return journey, transporting traders, missionaries, and others.[31] Throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century China became an object of heightened American interest. Yet, up until around the 1850s the vast majority of Americans had never seen China or even encountered its people. This began to change from 1848 as the California Gold Rush attracted in excess of one hundred thousand people to the region in two years.[32] Between 1849 and 1870 100,000 arrived from China.[33] Some Americans welcomed an influx of Chinese labour. Others feared a destabilisation of American society and in 1852 Chinese became the targets of legislation. The Foreign Miner's License Tax was officially aimed at all non-US citizens employed in the Californian mining sector but the majority of Chinese labourers at the time were miners.[34] The United States needed foreign workers but for the most part it wanted them from Europe.

Since the early 1800s Western intellectuals had studied the presumed, innate differences between the world's ethnic groups. Authors like Samuel George Morton and Robert Knox classified the world's populations, establishing imagined hierarchies of race.[35] Societal discourses classified the Chinese as undesirable and they were distanced from the 'normal' population over fears of 'civilizational decomposition'.[36] In 1868 the San Francisco Chronicle articulated the type of casual hostility which circulated American society:

It is a most disgusting fact that the boys of Oakland are not allowed to stone Chinamen, or to set dogs upon them with impunity. Nay more, free white citizens, of the heaven-descended Caucasian race, have actually been arrested . . . for no other offence than merely abusing Chinamen.[37]

Chinese immigrants were denied the right of American citizenship. Since 1790 only 'free white persons' had been granted this privilege after spending two years in the country.[38] They were marginalised but also represented as physically harmful. Threatened societies have been historically imagined as bodies whose health is in danger, and the arrival of Chinese immigrants to the United States coincided with the development of germ theory which introduced Americans to the link between germs and disease.[39] They were blamed for the spread of smallpox and leprosy and the Washington Post likened the 'wholesale' arrival of Chinese to a 'deadly plague'.[40]

[31] Calculated from figures cited in Y. P. Hao, 'Chinese Teas to America – A Synopsis', in Ernest May and John King Fairbank (eds), *America's China Trade in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 13.

[32] J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), pp. ix–x.

[33] Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 9.

[34] Randall Rohe, 'After the Gold Rush: Chinese Mining in the Far West, 1850–1890', in Arif Dirlik (ed.), *Chinese on the American frontier* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 17–18.

[35] See, for example, Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839); Robert Knox, *Races of Men: A Fragment* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850).

[36] Randolph Persaud, 'Situating Race in International Relations', in Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (eds), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 74.

[37] *San Francisco Chronicle* (3 July 1868).

[38] Naturalisation Act (An Act to Establish a Uniform Rule of Naturalisation), 26 March 1790. University of Washington, Bothell, available at: {http://library.uwb.edu/guides/USimmigration/1%20stat%20103.pdf} accessed 11 May 2012.

[39] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 75; Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 37.

[40] Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), p. 26; *Washington Post* (30 January 1879).

The anti-Chinese movement found a centre with the California Workingmen's Party which popularised the slogan 'The Chinese must go!'

Certainly, white Americans of the period were not uniquely racist or xenophobic. Nor were they uniformly prejudiced against immigrants from China. However, Caucasians were routinely privileged over other groups including the Chinese as American lawyers, judges and, crucially, political leaders began to promote the 'scientific' discoveries of the day.[41] When arguing for immigration restrictions for example Senator John Miller appealed directly to those who considered the Chinese a threat to the health of the nation: 'Let us keep the blood which circulates through our political system ... [and] preserve our life from the gangrene of Oriental civiliza-tion.'[42] In 1876 the California State Senate declared that the Chinese 'have never adapted themselves to our habits [and remain] impregnable to all the influences of Anglo-Saxon life'.[43]

As already noted, the United States has always been especially dependent upon representational practices to affirm and reaffirm its identity and in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century China and the Chinese were constructed as a danger to its survival. As such, the frequently cited 'China Question' was in fact the 'America Question'. A policy of restricting or even preventing Chinese immigration was not a foregone conclusion. However, powerful and pervasive representations of a China threat eventually ensured that any alternatives to exclusion were presented as no alternatives at all. Indeed, by the late 1870s political opposition to the anti-Chinese movement was almost non-existent.[44] During the presidential campaigns of 1876 and 1880 both main parties ran with anti-Chinese rhetoric so that the range of debate did not extend far.[45] In an 1879 referendum 150,000 Californians voted in favour of a total exclusion of Chinese immigrants from the state. Nine hundred voted against.[46]

In 1880 James Angell wrote to Secretary of State William Evarts: 'the absolute and formal prohibition of the [Chinese] labourers would be diametrically opposed to all our national traditions'.[47] In the Senate George Hoar asserted that a ban would represent a crime against the Declaration of Independence. 'The flag bears the stars of hope to all nations', he argued. 'A hundred thousand Chinese land in California and everything is changed ... The self-evident truth becomes the self-evident lie.'[48] However, the China 'threat' was now a dominant construction within American imaginations. In 1880 the *New York Times* echoed the sentiments of many when it argued that,

[41] Joe Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 83–5.

[42] Quoted in Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 224.

[43] Quoted in Elmer Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 39.

[44] Charles McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth Century America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 54.

[45] Foster Dulles, *China and America: The Story of their Relations Since 1784* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1967), p. 87.

[46] Bill Ong Hing, *Defining America through Immigration Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), p. 32.

[47] Quoted in Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p. 212.

[48] Ibid., p. 225.

[t]here are a few weak sentimentalists in the eastern states who would look upon a massacre of the Chinese in San Francisco as a shameful crime … Such people, however, have nothing to do with real politics, and their opinions are of very little consequence.[49]

Eventually, an emerging crisis of American identity enabled US China policy to act in its protection.[50] This crisis was not caused by China or the Chinese. It was generated by circulating American representations of a (often exaggerated) danger which provoked heightened fears over the vulnerability of the United States' Caucasian foundations. It helped, in turn, to perpetuate the construction of a threatening China so that the advancement of 'threat' discourses and the development of the crisis were a mutually constitutive and reinforcing process. As with the China 'threat' therefore the crisis was manufactured and, for those complicit within its production, it served the same important purpose: to affirm China's difference and enable desired courses of foreign policy. Robert McClellan argues that the truth about the Chinese was clouded by hyperbolic claims of their undesirability.[51] In fact, truths about the Chinese were a very heavy presence across American society. Their production and establishment ensured that the Chinese Exclusion Act could be voted into law on 23 March 1882.[52]

The dominant discourses of the period continued to meet resistance. Like Evarts and Hoar, Protestant missionaries consistently opposed Chinese exclusion laws.[53] Eastern senators voted against the Act and Senator Oliver Morton observed that 'if the Chinese in California were white people … I do not believe that the complaints and warfare made against them would have existed to any considerable extent'.[54] In unwitting confirmation of Morton's point Senator Henry Teller, in support of the Act, declared that 'the Caucasian race has a right … to look down upon every other branch of the human family'.[55] Stable and enduring constructions of China's threatening identity had represented an inextricable component of US China policy at every stage of its formulation, enactment, and justification. Discourses of race contributed significantly to a reality in which the Exclusion Act could be passed by a majority of 167 votes to 66.[56] They ensured that Americans could not only justifiably ban Chinese immigrants from entering their territory, but rebel against tenets upon which their society had been built and emerge from such a crisis with a sense that justice had prevailed.

To reconfirm, governmental foreign policy is more than a 'bridge' between states. It is active within the construction and reaffirmation of identity and the Exclusion Act itself confirmed the assumptions upon which it relied.[57] It declared, for example, that Americans found guilty of assisting the entry of illegal immigrants from China to the United States would be fined five hundred dollars per migrant and imprisoned

---

[49] *New York Times* (26 February 1880).

[50] Campbell, *Writing Security*, pp. 136–7.

[51] Robert McClellan, *The Heathen Chinee: A Study of American Attitudes Towards China, 1890–1905* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 26.

[52] Chinese Exclusion Act, University of Washington, Bothell (6 May 1882), available at: {http://library. uwb.edu/guides/USimmigration/1882_chinese_exclusion_act.html} accessed 8 March 2012.

[53] Judy Yung, *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 127.

[54] Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p. 239; Quoted in Sandmeyer, *Anti-Chinese Movement*, p. 88.

[55] Quoted in Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p. 228.

[56] 59 abstained.

[57] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 61.

for up to a year. It also restated that the Chinese should be refused American citizenship. In such a way the Act reasserted the undesirability of the Chinese and the threat China presented to the security and stability of the United States. It was a political performance complicit within the protection of (white) American identity by perpetuating the truths by which it had been enabled. The argument is not that China and the Chinese were uniformly of no danger to Americans or the United States. It is that they were imagined as a very particular kind of fantasised non-white threat. In particular, it mattered little that the Chinese were still relatively few in number since danger could be ascribed to any identity which 'threatened' that of America.[58] By 1880 for example the Chinese had come to represent just 0.002 per cent of the US population.[59]

These are the processes which explain *how* the Chinese Exclusion Act was made possible and how it can be argued that the China 'threat' of the mid-to-late nineteenth century is inexplicable without attention to the discourses which gave that country and its people meaning. Physical immigration alone does not provide an adequately convincing explanation for the fears and hostility which circulated American society, nor the extreme measures implemented to reduce their number. American workers may have feared for their employment but the Chinese were uniquely singled out as a danger from all incoming peoples. This is illustrated by the ability of Irish immigrants to lead vocal anti-Chinese protests without significant reaction.[60]

To some extent the motivations of individuals and groups who constructed China in this way varied. However, the discourses of separation and difference which circulated most prominently were boundary producing performances advanced to enable and legitimise the types of restrictions enacted.[61] Those who gained from the establishment of the fantasised China 'threat' were therefore principally those who attributed the most significance to particular (racial) understandings about the US and how its identity was threatened by non-white immigrant Chinese. They broadly supported measures to protect its presumed Caucasian identity and did so by emphasising China's racial foreignness and the implicit dangers it brought. Some 'came late' to images, reproducing what Norman Fairclough calls common sense. Common sense knowledges are almost unconsciously perpetuated and rarely scrutinised or challenged.[62] They largely go unquestioned since they are assumed to provide true reflections of reality and for many within the United States the non-White Chinese simply 'were' a danger to their society.[63]

Ultimately, China was not dispassionately observed or external to discourses and representations about it. Consciously or otherwise power/knowledge constructed China as a threat to among the most intrinsic values of American identity. It was further advanced by US China policy itself which served in its protection. Such truths were reproduced and unproblematically accepted as understandings about the China 'threat' overwhelmed resistance to the logic they claimed to advance. Indeed,

---

[58] James Der Derian, 'The War of Networks', *Theory and Event*, 5:4 (2002), available at: {http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4derderian.html} accessed 19 April 2012.

[59] Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), p. 110.

[60] Warren Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations* (5th edn, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 30.

[61] Ashley, 'Foreign Policy', p. 51.

[62] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 92.

[63] Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p. 77.

support in the House of Representatives had been nationwide, even from states with few or no Chinese.[64] Future President Grover Cleveland argued that the Chinese were 'an element ignorant in our constitution and laws [and] impossible of assimilation'.[65] In such a way policymakers were exposed to, and actively drew from, the most vivid and pervasive representations of the China 'threat' as the arrival of new Chinese immigrants was prohibited for a minimum of ten years.

Case study two: the early Cold War China 'threat'

In October 1949, following the Chinese civil war of the 1930s and 1940s, Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China. Mao's communists had defeated the Nationalists, or Kuomintang (KMT), of Chiang Kai-shek who had long been supported by the United States. Following the communist victory Washington rejected formal relations with Beijing and maintained diplomacy with the Nationalists who retreated to Taiwan. In February 1950 Beijing and Moscow signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. Later that year Chinese troops began fighting in the Korean War against the United States in alliance with the Soviet-backed North. For decades China had been perceived as an ally and Chinese and Americans had fought together in the Second World War. Now, the country was reconstructed as a danger to the United States. 'Red' China was a threat in the sense that American troops were being killed in Korea. Nonetheless, the course of Sino-US relations during the early 1950s, and the response by the United States to a new and seemingly imminent China 'threat', is once more unexplainable without attention to the centrality of American identity.

The outbreak of the Korean War led President Harry Truman on 27 June 1950 to order the American Seventh Fleet to China to deter an invasion of Taiwan. Yet, at this time the PRC was still to enter the war or become involved in hostilities with the United States. China's capabilities were also broadly unchanged and until the late 1940s it was argued that they could not threaten American security in the short to medium term. In 1948 for example the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff asserted that 'in any war in the foreseeable future China could at best be [considered] ... an inconsequential enemy'.[66] This view was reinforced in February 1949 by National Security Council report (NSC) 41 which declared that China was unlikely to threaten the US 'within the next generation or more'.[67] The American press had also responded to the establishment of the PRC in a predominantly measured tone.[68]

From the early 1950s then China became a 'threat' for reasons other than its physical and behavioural attributes. Just like in the mid-to-late nineteenth century 'dangers' from China were not objectively observed. They relied upon processes of

---

[64] Takaki, *Strangers*, p. 111.

[65] Quoted in Michael Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 92.

[66] Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948*, vol. 8 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 147.

[67] Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1949*, vol. 9 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1974), pp. 826–34.

[68] See, for example, *Los Angeles Times* (2 October 1949); *Washington Post* (2 October 1949); *Chicago Daily Tribune* (2 October 1949); *New York Times* (2 October 1949).

interpretation and representation and were again central to prescribing the limits of political potentiality in Washington. The US intervention in defence of Taiwan in June 1950 has been predominantly (although not exclusively) analysed in terms of military and strategic considerations.[69] The questions posed have generally been 'why' questions; why did the United States choose to defend an island now threatened by Chinese aggression? The question which remains is how the defence of Taiwan was actually made possible. Even before its defeat to the communists Chiang's Nationalist government was perceived as 'undemocratic, corrupt and incompetent'.[70] Wider concerns were raised that his regime was violent and dictatorial. In October 1949 Secretary of State Dean Acheson argued that the United States should not support Taiwan's 'discredited, decayed KMT government'. As such, the island did not constitute a priority to American security.[71]

How then was it possible for Washington to mobilise support for Taiwan so soon after its government had been dismissed as corrupt and dictatorial, against an 'enemy' so recently identified as impotent?[72] On 23 June – just four days before the Seventh Fleet arrived in the region – Acheson reaffirmed Washington's intention to abstain from military involvement there.[73] As always, societal representations gave China's (and the United States') material forces meaning and expose *how* US policies of the time could be enacted towards a socially constructed rather than self evident China threat. Furthermore, their exploration once again demonstrates the continuing function of those policies in the reaffirmation and protection of American identity.

When Truman announced his intention to protect Taiwan he argued that '[t]he attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations'. Communist forces, he asserted, now represented a direct threat to American security.[74] Truman had emphasised the criticality of shielding the United States from communism but communism itself does not constitute a threat. It requires the understanding that it represents a threat by contradicting the values of non-communist states.[75] Certainly, Taiwan was a key component in the struggle for East Asian influence by allowing an American presence less than two hundred kilometres from China. However, the Truman administration did not consider formal alliances with every regime threatened by a powerful neighbour, particularly those it regarded as violent, undemocratic, and corrupt. American support for Taiwan not only required an appreciation of the strategic realities of the Cold War, but the understanding that it represented a non-communist member of the imagined Free World and an extension of the values of American identity. Taiwan, like China, existed *for* American imaginations. To re-phrase Fairbank, at any given time the truth about the island was in their heads.[76]

---

[69] This is a key point made in Tunsjø, *US Taiwan Policy*, p. 21.
[70] Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 81.
[71] Department of State, *Foreign Relations, 1949*, vol. 9, p. 466.
[72] Øystein Tunsjø addresses this type of question as part of a wider analysis of US-Sino-Taiwan relations, demonstrating that early Cold War shifts in US foreign policy were inextricable from powerful understandings of the identities of China, Taiwan, and the United States itself. See Tunsjø, *Constructing the Triangle.*
[73] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 187.
[74] Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decision Making on Vietnam*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 373.
[75] Campbell, *Writing Security*, esp. chap. 6.
[76] Fairbank, *China Perceived*, p. xiv.

As ever, the material forces which 'threatened' the United States were not the external objects of circulating discourses about them. They were inextricable from, and constitutive *of*, those discourses. Observes Bruce Cumings:

China, little known to most Americans … could become 'China', an issue that most people could be mobilized around because it stood for nothing in the American mind and therefore could stand for everything – it was a tabula rasa on which the right-wing and the expansionists could write.[77]

China's capacity to become a threat had not increased since so recently being dismissed, but power/knowledge now made China threatening to American security. This is illustrated by the Truman administration's 1947 Executive Order 9835 (the 'Loyalty Order'). Any individual or group affiliated with communism, it declared, would be barred from employment by the federal government.[78] Communist values were anathema to the functioning of the United States and as such had to be repelled. In the speech which came to constitute his so-called doctrine Truman pledged American support for 'free people' threatened by communists.[79] Labelling communist dangers 'outside pressures' it was an act of foreign policy designed to protect American identity.[80]

The same can be said of NSC 68.[81] Written in 1950 this provided the blueprint for America's Cold War response to communism.[82] Numerable governmental statements of the time were based upon its rhetoric and it drew inspiration from the Declaration of Independence and American Constitution. In particular, it emphasised the need to 'assure the integrity and vitality of our free society'.[83] Thus, American representations of an imagined China threat adjusted the boundaries of possibility beyond intervention in the Taiwan Strait. After its entry into the Korean War for example the PRC was subjected to a trade embargo by Washington. Just as the Exclusion Act of 1882 had restricted and controlled the Chinese at home, Washington's early Cold War containment policies were the inscription of discourses which separated 'threatening' China from the 'true' American population. It was not a 'bridge' between states or the final product of representation.[84] The embargo was intended to slow China's development but, like the Truman Doctrine and the Loyalty Order, served more fundamentally to designate it an international pariah.[85]

Washington's policy reaffirmed China's (communist) foreignness from the (democratic-capitalist) United States; as Truman explicitly observed, the aim was to restrict trade 'between the free world and the Soviet Union and its Satellites'.[86] Discourses of ideology had largely replaced those of race in the protection of what

[77] Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, vol. 2: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 107.
[78] Executive Order 9835, 21 March 1947. Reprinted in Barton Bernstein and Allen Matusow, *The Truman Administration: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper and Row), p. 363.
[79] Department of State, *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 16 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1944), pp. 534–6.
[80] Department of State, *Bulletin*, 16, p. 535.
[81] National Security Council, NSC 68, 14 April 1950. Reprinted in Ernest May (ed.), *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 1993), pp. 23–82.
[82] Stephen Cimbala, *US Military Strategy and the Cold War Endgame* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 37.
[83] In May, *American Cold War Strategy*, p. 26.
[84] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 61.
[85] Foot, *Practice of Power*, p. 54.
[86] Department of State, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1951* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1965), p. 316.

it was but the US was still imagined as a 'fully made' society vulnerable to 'civilisational decomposition'.[87] Once again, acts of US policy themselves were designed to prevent the erosion of American identity, as additionally illustrated by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 which moved from a focus on racial or national origins to affiliation with communism as a barrier to entry to the United States.[88]

During the nineteenth-century hysteria over immigration from China the Chinese had been identified as a danger to white America. By the 1950s representations of a China threat had adapted to new circumstances but it remained fantasised and socially constructed. Once more understandings of the 'threat' were challenged, for instance by writers like Agnes Smedley and Edgar Snow. Smedley's *Battle Hymn of China* recounted time spent in the company of the Chinese communists and was deeply sympathetic towards Mao and his followers.[89] Snow's *Red Star Over China*, among his other works, was also notable for advancing resistance discourses of a more civilised, less antagonistic PRC.[90] By 1966 *Red Star* alone had sold 65,000 copies in the United States.[91] However, societal rules of discursive exclusion marginalised ideas which competed with those of Robert Rigg, for example, who argued that '[n]o fat and sadistic warlords of China's history will ever be able to compete with the grisly record of the militaristic Chinese communists'.[92] Chinese authors like Shaw-tong Liu further emphasised China's foreign, communist identity. 'Red China's rulers are the new partners of the dictators of Russia ... I am one of those few fortunate fish who escaped through the net', he explained.[93]

In addition, of course, the communist 'threat' was promoted by Senator Joseph McCarthy who engineered an unparalleled fear of communism and helped secure the discursive hegemony of a 'threatening' Red China.[94] In cases like this representations of China were explicitly advanced as propaganda. They were functional, with a clear purpose to demonise the PRC and present as unequivocal the dangers it was understood to pose. The boundaries between governmental Cold War McCarthyesque propaganda and ('lower level') societal discourses, however, were regularly blurred as representations of a China threat once more worked primarily for those who benefitted most from its existence within American imaginations. Put differently, while some were perhaps more directive and overtly instrumental than others, to some degree American representations of a China threat were each intended to present a common

---

[87] Persaud, 'Situating Race', p. 74.
[88] Immigration and Nationality Act, 27 June 1952. University of Washington, Bothell, available at: {http://library.uwb.edu/guides/USimmigration/1952_immigration_and_nationality_act.html} accessed 4 July 2012.
[89] Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1943).
[90] Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Random House, 1938). See also Edgar Snow, *Random Notes on Red China* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1957); Edgar Snow, *The Other Side of the River* (New York: Random House, 1962).
[91] A. T. Steele, *The American People and China* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), pp. 171–2.
[92] Robert Rigg, *Red China's Fighting Hordes: A Realistic Account of the Chinese Communist Army* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Co., 1951), p. 19. See also, for example, Edward Hunter, *Brain-Washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men's Minds* (New York: Vanguard, 1951); Albert Dunlap, *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: The Experiences of an American Doctor in China* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1956).
[93] Shaw-tong Liu, *Out of Red China* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1953), p. ix.
[94] See Richard Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ellen Shrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History With Documents* (2nd edn, New York: Palgrave, 2002).

reality. As in the late nineteenth century – consciously or otherwise – they were purposeful and useful, with the power to frame parameters of behaviour in Washington. They were again produced by those who attributed most significance to particular understandings about the United States; in this case its commitments to personal liberty, democracy, and free markets. The material realities of the Korean War in particular were not inconsequential, but articulations of the need to secure Americans from Truman's 'outside pressures' introduced new avenues of behaviour. As Bostdorff explains: 'Korea marked a turning point in the application of American foreign policy but the Truman Doctrine was the symbolic turning point *which made that transformation possible*.'[95]

As it had done more than half a century earlier American identity entered a period of crisis. Exaggerated claims of a China threat were again responsible as the existing order was considered increasingly endangered.[96] This developing crisis once more worked in tandem with the discourses which distanced China from the United States, reinforcing the construction of the threat as rhetoric intensified over how to restore order. As before, the purpose of this latest crisis was to facilitate particular avenues of US policy. Only this way can it be revealed *how* the United States could legitimately defend a regime on Taiwan dismissed as unfit to govern, while containing and marginalising a land and people so recently declared unthreatening. Once more, powerful discourses had been advanced to enable particular policies towards a constructed China threat. The Truman Doctrine in particular confirmed understandings of American identity and made it unthinkable that communism could succeed where capitalism and democracy might fail. As ever, China was what American discourses allowed it to be. Most importantly, those discourses continued to frame the boundaries of Washington's approach towards a China 'threat' which existed primarily within and *for* American imaginations.

Case study three: the early twenty-first-century China 'threat'

China's military and economic strengths are far greater today than at any point in the history of Sino-US relations. Yet, the 'threat' it presents to American security is no less a social construction than in the past. The modern day proliferation of popular and academic 'China threat' literatures in particular is reflective of the increasingly widespread conviction that a 'rising' China inevitably constitutes a real or potential danger.[97] Robert Kaplan explains that 'the American military contest with China in the Pacific will define the twenty first century'.[98] He does not question if or even when China might become a threat. He emphasises its inevitability. Babbin

---

[95] Denise Bostdorff, *Proclaiming the Truman Doctrine: The Cold War Call to Arms* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), p. 146, emphasis added.

[96] Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, p. 13.

[97] The academic literature includes Mearsheimer, 'China's Unpeaceful Rise'; Cohen, 'China's Rise in Historical Perspective'; Warren Cohen, 'China's Strategic Culture', *Atlantic Monthly*, 279:3 (1997), pp. 103–5; Denny Roy, 'Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 149–68. The popular literature includes Bill Gertz, *The China Threat: How the People's Republic Targets America* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2000); Constantine Menges, *China: The Gathering Threat* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Current, 2005); Edward Timperlake and William Triplett, *Red Dragon Rising: Communist China's Military Threat to America* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2002).

[98] Robert Kaplan, 'How We Would Fight China', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 295:5 (2005), p. 49.

and Timperlake provide a fictional narrative of future Sino-American tensions in which, among other things, China uses cyber warfare to shut down American defence systems. The hostile scenario they present, it is argued, 'could easily become fact … The Verdict: China means war.'[99] Certainly, and as has been the case throughout history, China is not uniformly perceived in these terms. Among a significant proportion of the American population, however, the China 'threat' is an accepted and relatively unproblematic phenomenon.

China now has the world's largest population, the fastest growing economy, the largest army, the largest middle class, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, a manned space program and a nuclear arsenal.[100] Yet, all of these things do not necessarily make China a threat. Countries which share variations of these, notably the possession of nuclear weapons, a permanent presence in the Security Council and significant standing armies are not perceived in this way. Indeed, and as Director Clapper revealed in the Senate in early 2011, states like Russia with far greater stockpiles of nuclear weapons and significant additional military hardware can be viewed in less threatening terms, even when capability is cited as the critical factor.[101] Furthermore, the PRC has had a large population and a substantial army since its founding in 1949, nuclear weapons since 1964 and a seat on the Security Council since 1971 without consistently being interpreted as a threat. Accordingly, forces additional to those of China's capabilities must still be implicated in understandings about the dangers it is said to present.

Today's China 'threat' is yet to provoke a crisis of American identity as it has done in the past. In the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries representations of the 'threat' were often far more hyperbolic. The realities of the dangers posed by China were more acute and, accordingly, the existing order was perceived as less stable and more liable to rupture. In part, this is because China has historically been less well understood and less familiar to Westerners. In the nineteenth century China and its people were an enigma to the majority of Westerners so that representations of the 'dangers' they posed could more readily appear convincing, be less frequently challenged and were less constrained in the production of fantasy. In the early years of the Cold War the PRC was newly formed and still a comparatively mysterious entity whose future intentions were inevitably less well understood. In short, discourses of separation and difference were more effective than in the modern information age where cross cultural contact is deeper and where China appears fundamentally less alien.

In addition, we must also consider that for many there is less incentive today to construct an immediate China threat to US security. The Cold War was a period of intense and passionate debate over how to contain global communism. During the late nineteenth century many Americans argued vehemently for a cessation of Chinese immigration. As we have seen, at both of these moments the crises served relatively well defined policy strategies which required the existence of a threat. Today, the benefits of a China 'threat' are perhaps less widely acknowledged. More than ever, China and the United States share complex and often mutually beneficial

[99] Jed Babbin and Edward Timperlake, *Showdown: Why China Wants War With the United States* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2006), pp. 23–4.
[100] William Callahan, 'How to Understand China: The Dangers and Opportunities of Being a Rising Power', *Review of International Studies*, 31:4 (2005), p. 701.
[101] CBS News, 'Mortal Threat?'.

political and economic relations which are generally managed with care. While tensions between Beijing and Washington exist and the China 'threat' is often misrepresented, the reality of danger is less useful in an era when a corresponding policy response is less immediately desirable.

Despite this, certain realities are still able to be created within which policies are made possible and justified, primarily for those who continue to make China's identity foreign from that of the United States. This can be seen for example in Washington's enduring commitment to defend its core values in Taiwan. Between 1995 and 1996 the PRC conducted a series of provocative missile tests in the Taiwan Strait. Their purpose was to influence presidential elections on the island and deter voters from appointing a pro-independence candidate. The United States' Cold War policy of maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan at the expense of the PRC was partly enabled by representations of the former as a threatened bastion of American values. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's intention to 'preserve the vital stake of the free world in a free Formosa' was shared by President Clinton four decades later when he ordered more American vessels into the Strait than had been assembled in East Asia since the Vietnam War.[102] Clinton's aim was to defend America's material interests in the region. However, those interests remained constitutive of discourses which gave them a particular meaning and which were framed by understandings of an identity still present and vulnerable in the region. Once more they were a boundary producing performance and the goal, as Clinton confirmed, was to encourage the long term process of 'deepening the roots of democracy in Asia'.[103]

Of course, efforts to lessen the possibility of conflict are rarely to be condemned. The key point is that these events allude to the familiarly autobiographical nature of the China 'threat' within American imaginations today, and to the centrality of fantasised representations of that threat to policy processes in Washington.[104] Specifically, the incident exposes how pervasive, subjective truths about China (as well as of Taiwan and the United States) could still formulate a reality within which US intervention in the region could be legitimised in defence of American identity. Indeed, those truths ensured that anything other than intervention was implausible. In July 1996 the Clinton administration declared that 'the United States has a continuing interest and a continuing presence in the Asia-Pacific region and ... we're not going anywhere'.[105]

Since 2002 annual reports by the Department of Defence on the military capabilities of the PRC have included a dedicated section to the specific issue of Taiwan's security.[106] In 2005 it was argued explicitly in the Senate that Taiwan and United

---

[102] Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955*, vol. 2 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 118; John Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States and Taiwan's Democratization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 3.

[103] Ashley, 'Foreign Policy', p. 51; Alvin Rubinstein, Albina Shayevich, and Boris Zlotnikov, *The Clinton Foreign Policy Reader: Presidential Speeches with Commentary* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 116.

[104] Pan, 'China Threat', p. 313.

[105] William Clinton, 'Press briefing by David Johnson, Deputy White House Press Secretary and Senior Director of Public Affairs for the National Security Council, 3 July 1996'. The American Presidency Project, available at: {www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=88490} accessed 4 May 2012.

[106] Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China* [2002–8] (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, [2002–8]).

States were particularly vulnerable to the emerging China 'threat'.[107] The continuing isolation of these two polities in this context further demonstrates their partial conflation within American imaginations, so that a threat to Taiwan is still *necessarily* a threat to the United States. On 14 January 2012 President Obama restated that, while in principle the United States would continue to pursue a 'One China Policy', its relations with Taiwan were grounded upon values not shared with Beijing. 'The relationship between the people of the United States and the people of Taiwan is based on common interests and a shared commitment to freedom and democracy', he declared.[108]

The contemporary China 'threat' to the core American values of democracy and free markets has many parallels with, and in many respects is a continuation of, that which became so pervasive during the Cold War. Indeed, the endurance of this understanding is found elsewhere, such as in articulations about the so-called Beijing Consensus.[109] The Beijing Consensus is understood to represent a model of political and economic development increasingly advanced within developing regions like Africa and South America.[110] Observers consider that its approach challenges that traditionally associated with the United States and the wider West, the so-called Washington Consensus. The Washington Consensus cites the importance of such policy instruments as free market forces and private property ownership as vital components of development. The Beijing Consensus, in contrast, promotes state-led development.[111] Stefan Halper argues that while China's 'market-authoritarian model' provides high rates of growth and stability and promises of improved living conditions, it is devoid of the norms and values expected in the West. 'Absent are the freedoms we believe essential – freedoms of speech, belief and assembly, and the notion of the loyal opposition'.[112]

Anxieties generated by the Beijing Consensus do not result primarily from that which it prescribes. They arise from the challenges it appears to present to the West. Indeed, the Chinese themselves refrain from promoting the Beijing Consensus to avoid provoking tensions with the United States.[113] The aim in Beijing has been to project the image of a responsible new power but China's development is itself less stable, organised, and coherent than many assume.[114] A clear consensus, in short,

[107] United States Senate, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 109th Congress, First Session, vol. 151, pt. 6* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2005), p. 7592.

[108] Barack Obama, 'Statement on Elections in Taiwan'. The American Presidency Project, available at: {http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=98934&st=taiwan&st1=democracy#axzz1p2KT5z8i} accessed 17 August 2012.

[109] Joshua Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004).

[110] See, for example, Dorothy Guerrero and Firoze Manji (eds), *China's New Role in Africa and the South* (Oxford: Fahamu Books, 2008); Riordan Guadalupe Paz (eds), *China's Expansion into the Western Hemisphere* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2008).

[111] Charles Burton, 'The "Beijing Consensus" and China's Quest for Legitimacy on the International Stage', in André Laliberté and Marc Lanteigne (eds), *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[112] Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[113] Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong, 'China's Soft Power: Discussions, Recourses and Prospects', *Asian Survey*, 48:3 (2008), p. 462. See also Helmut Anheier and Yudhishthir Isar, *Conflicts and Tensions* (London: SAGE, 2007), p. 181 and p. 465.

[114] Shaun Breslin, 'Understanding China's Regional Rise: Interpretations, Identities and Implications', *International Affairs*, 85:4 (2009), p. 821; Shaun Breslin, 'Developmental State or Dysfunctional Development?', *Third World Quarterly*, 17:4 (1996), pp. 689–706.

has never existed. Moreover, China's broad global approach to international politics is often misinterpreted as targeted directly at the West, when it is actually intended for multiple audiences.[115] Today, selected American fears about China are accurate, rational, and logical. However, 'myopia and fantasy' also ensure that they can be more problematic than they seem.[116] As it has been repeatedly throughout history, the China 'threat' to US security is not objectively observable. It is a product of power/knowledge and a subjective interpretation of American design.

In addition, and just as they did throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century and the early Cold War period, acts of US China policy continue to protect the identity from which the 'threat' is produced. This is most evident in the sustained commitment to the defence of Taiwan, by which China's identity is affirmed as foreign to that of the United States and a threat to the core values of capitalism and democracy. This policy strategy constitutes a 'neocontainment' approach designed to manage and control China's apparently threatening behaviour.[117] Indeed, as Washington announced its intention in late 2011 to station an additional 2,500 American troops on the north coast of Australia, Beijing interpreted the move as part a wider policy of 'hostile encirclement'.[118] To paraphrase Campbell, the presence of an opposing identity which challenges understandings about the self can be enough to produce assumptions of a threat.[119] Today, China's (particularly non-democratic) identity continues to be dislocated from that of the United States, so that 'almost by its mere geographical existence China has been qualified as an absolute strategic "other" [of the United States], a discursive construct from which it cannot escape'.[120] Once again, these are the processes which explain *how* particular courses of American foreign policy are enabled, towards a particular type of manufactured China 'threat'.

During the mid-to-late nineteenth century and the early Cold War period China had the potential to endanger US security. However, in both cases the 'threats' perceived were products of American imaginations. For the most part they were produced with the intention of legitimising policy strategies which could protect the socially constructed (white and democratic-capitalist) American identity. Material forces, while not insignificant, were insufficient to explain both the extent to which China was perceived as a danger and the policy procedures implemented in response. Today's China 'threat' does not yet pose a comparable crisis to American identity. However, assessments of material forces alone remain inadequate explanatory factors of the 'dangers' it is understood to present. China remains the subject of an American lens, interpreted by many as a threat through representations of its status as a *necessarily* dangerous foreign other.

[115] Shogo Suzuki, 'The Myth and Reality of China's "Soft Power"', in Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (eds), *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 209.
[116] Shogo Suzuki, 'Chinese Soft Power, Insecurity Studies, Myopia and Fantasy', *Third World Quarterly*, 30:4 (2009), pp. 779–93.
[117] Pan, '"China Threat"', p. 319.
[118] *New York Times* (16 November 2011).
[119] Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 3, emphasis in original.
[120] Pan, '"China Threat"', p. 317.

Conclusion

The modern day China 'threat' to the United States is not an unproblematic, neutrally verifiable phenomenon. It is an imagined construction of American design and the product of societal representations which, to a significant extent, have established the truth that a 'rising' China endangers US security. This is an increasingly acknowledged, but still relatively under-developed, concept within the literature.[121] The purpose of this article has been to expose how 'threats' from China towards the United States have always been contingent upon subjective interpretation. The three case studies chosen represent those moments across the lifetime of Sino-US relations at which China has been perceived as most threatening to American security. The 'threats' emerged in highly contrasting eras. The nature of each was very different and they emerged from varying sources (broadly speaking, from immigration in the nineteenth century and from 'great power' rivalry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). Yet in this way they most effectively demonstrate how China 'threats' have repeatedly existed as socially constructed phenomenon.

Collectively they reveal the consistent centrality of understandings about the United States in perceptions of external danger. They demonstrate that, regardless of China's ability to assert material force or of the manner in which it has been seen to impose itself upon the United States, the reality of danger can be manufactured and made real. China 'threats' have always been threats to American identity so that the individual sources of 'danger' – whether a nuclear capability or an influx of (relatively few) foreign immigrants – have never been the sole determining factors. As James Der Derian notes, danger can be ascribed to otherness wherever it may be found.[122] During the mid-to-late nineteenth century and throughout the early Cold War, perceptions of China 'threats' provoked crises of American identity. The twenty-first-century China 'threat' is yet to be understood in this way but it remains inexplicable in simple material terms. As ever, the physical realities of China are important but they are interpreted in such a way to make them threatening, regardless of Beijing's intentions.

Most importantly, this article has shown how processes of representation have been complicit at every stage of the formulation, enactment, and justification of US China policy. Their primary purpose has been to dislocate China's identity from that of the United States and introduce opportunities for action. Further, those policies themselves have reaffirmed the discourses of separation and difference which make China foreign from the United States, protecting American identity from the imagined threat. Ultimately, this analysis has sought to expose the inadequacy of approaches to the study of US China policy which privilege and centralise material forces to the extent that ideas are subordinated or even excluded.

Joseph Nye argues that the China Threat Theory has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Based upon a crude hypothetical assumption that there exists a 50 per cent chance of China becoming aggressive and a 50 per cent chance of it not, Nye explains, to treat China as an enemy now effectively discounts 50 per cent of the future.[123] In such way he emphasises the ideational constitution of material forces

---

[121] Ibid., esp. pp. 310–13.
[122] Der Derian, 'War of Networks'.
[123] Joseph Nye, 'The Case for Deep Engagement', *Foreign Affairs*, 44:4 (1995), p. 94.

and the power of discourse to create selected truths about the world so that certain courses of action are enabled while others are precluded. Assessments such as those of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in March 2011 should therefore not only be considered misguided, but also potentially dangerous. For while they appear to represent authoritative statements of fact they actually rely upon subjective assumptions about China and the material capabilities he describes.

In late 2010 President Obama informed Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that 'the American people [want] to continue to build a growing friendship and strong relationship between the peoples of China and the United States'.[124] The hope, of course, is that a peaceful and cooperative future can be secured. Following the announcement that the Asia Pacific is to constitute the primary focus of Washington's early twenty-first-century foreign policy strategy, American interpretations of China must be acknowledged as a central force within an increasingly pertinent relationship. The basis of their relations will always be fundamentally constituted by ideas and history informs us that particular American discourses of China have repeatedly served to construct vivid and sometimes regrettable realities about that country and its people. Crucially, it tells us that they have always been inextricable from the potentialities of US China policy. As Sino-US relations become increasingly consequential the intention must be for American representations of the PRC – and indeed Chinese representations of the United States – to become the focus of more concerted scholarly attention. Only in this way can the contours of those relations be more satisfactorily understood, so that the types of historical episodes explored in this analysis might somehow be avoided in the future.

---

[124] Barack Obama, 'Remarks Prior to a Meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao of China in New York City'. The American Presidency Project, available online: {www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=59401} accessed 1 June 2012.