

1-22-2013

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Recommended Citation

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Peer-reviewed Conference Paper
2012 East Asia Security Symposium and Conference
同行互评会议论文
2012 东亚安全座谈谈论会
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US American ‘Japan Bashing’ in the 1980s and Today’s ‘China Threat’: Is History Repeating Itself?

Abstract: This paper examines American rhetoric since the late 1990s about the ‘rise of China’ in military and economic terms and compares it to the previous phenomenon of ‘Japan bashing.’ In the 1980s, Americans charged that the Japanese unfair trade practices were costing jobs and hastening America’s decline. While Japan’s stagnant economy in the 1990s eased the bilateral relationship, China became the next rising state of concern. In addition to substantial trade deficits, the PRC is the US’ most formidable military competitor, has an appalling human rights record, and is not an ally. These factors raise the risk of serious conflict.

Keywords: China, US, PRC, Japan, rhetoric, international communication, conflict resolution

20世纪80年代美国对日本的“抨击”与今天的“中国威胁”：历史是否重演？

摘要: 从20世纪90年代后期起，美国开始发表有关中国军事和经济“崛起”的言论，本文研究了这些言论，并将其与之前“抨击日本”的现象进行比较。20世纪80年代，美国指责日本不公平的贸易措施削减了美国的工作岗位并加速了美国的衰落。20世纪90年代，日本经济陷入滞胀，这缓和了美日双边关系，美国开始把注意力转向中国。除了高企的贸易赤字，中国还是美国在军事上最强大的竞争对手；中国的人权纪录十分可怕，中国也不是美国的盟友。这些因素都增加了爆发严重冲突的风险。

关键词：中国，美国，中华人民共和国，日本，言论，国际交流，冲突解决

US AMERICAN ‘JAPAN BASHING’ IN THE 1980s AND TODAY’S ‘CHINA THREAT’: IS HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF?¹

Since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, US-China relations often have been difficult for the two governments to manage. For example, in the autumn of 2009, the Empire State Building was lit up in red and yellow in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) birth. A number of US American commentators wrote that such a gesture was inappropriate at best, indicating implicit support of the ‘bloody communist takeover’ and subsequent repressive rule of the regime’s leaders.² Still others asserted that the property owners were signaling that the US has ‘sold out’ or ‘kowtowed’ to China.³ What is intriguing is that a remarkably similar wave of alarm came from the news in 1989 that Japanese companies were buying such iconic American sites and companies as Rockefeller Plaza in New York and Columbia Pictures in Hollywood.⁴

Numerous similarities between the ‘Japan bashing’ and ‘China threat’ eras indicate the importance of comparing US American discourse that emerged in both situations. This paper investigates the concern in the US since the late 1990s about the ‘China threat’ in military, diplomatic, and economic terms and compares it to the previous phenomenon in the 1980s-early 1990s of American ‘Japan bashing.’ After all, major shifts in US American foreign policy often have been justified by significant rhetorical changes in how various global ‘others’ have been interpreted.⁵

¹ Thanks to *Swords & Ploughshares* for agreeing to use of portions of my previous article, “The Implications of Japan Bashing for U.S.-Japan Relations,” *Swords & Ploughshares* 8, 2 (Spring 1999): 1-13. Quansheng Zhao has provided much support over the years, dating back to when I first started being concerned about ‘China threat’ discourse. I also want to thank the attendees of the China-America Association for Public Affairs’ Pre-ABFM (Association for Budgeting & Financial Management) Symposium on China Studies, the Political Communication and Peacebuilding panel at the 2011 International Studies Association conference, and the 2012 East Asia Security Symposium Conference at China Foreign Affairs University for their comments on various presentations of this material. In addition, I greatly appreciate Patrick Thaddeus Jackson’s typically cogent suggestions. Of course, any mistakes are my responsibility alone.

² Joseph Abrams, ‘Empire State Building Goes Red for Communist China, Sparking Protest’, Fox News, 30 September 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2009/09/30/empire-state-building-goes-red-communist-china-sparking-protest/>, accessed 17 April 2011.

³ Doug Heye, ‘The Empire State Building’s Disgusting Kowtow to China’, *US News & World Report*, Thomas Jefferson Street blog, 30 September 2009, 10:38 AM ET; <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/doug-heyne/2009/09/30/the-empire-state-buildings-disgusting-kowtow-to-china>, accessed 1 October 2009; also see Clyde Haberman, ‘Bright Lights That Mask the Darkness’, *New York Times*, 1 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/02/nyregion/02nyc.html?scp=1&sq=Empire%20State%20Building%20China&st=cse>, accessed 17 April 2011.

⁴ Robert J. Cole, ‘Japanese Buy New York Cachet with Deal for Rockefeller Center’, *New York Times*, 31 October 1989; <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/31/business/japanese-buy-new-york-cachet-with-deal-for-rockefeller-center.html>, accessed 19 September 2010.

⁵ Examples include Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006) in the context of Europe after World War II; and Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds*:

This paper approaches these issues first by utilizing the ‘self/other nexus’ of identity construction to examine the ‘Japan bashing’ and ‘China threat’ debates in US politics.⁶ Constructionism⁷ provides a useful approach given its focus on political rhetoric’s ‘explanatory leverage’ in policy debates and applies here to the dynamics of US American identity processes.⁸ After all, as John Gillis notes, ‘Identities ... are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*. As such they have no existence beyond our politics, our social relations, and our histories’.⁹ Furthermore, such debates indicate that it is no mistake that usually ‘[d]ifference is constituted in relation to identity’.¹⁰

More crucial to this paper, however, is the central problem faced in politics of ‘rhetorical contestation’, in which various ‘parties [attempt] to maneuver each other onto more favorable rhetorical terrain and thereby to close off routes of acceptable rebuttal’.¹¹ As part of this type of political competition, ‘rhetorical commonplaces’ are deployed frequently in public discussions of US-Japan and US-China relations. Rhetorical commonplaces are familiar units of rhetoric that often are called upon in a given debate to justify a particular course of action.¹² Usually they act much like a grammar for public debate, showing what ideas are recognizable, and, more to the point, *useful* in such contests. They provide a sense of the range of what ‘options’ are possible in a given political context—and yet note that they often constrain significantly the general sense of what is permissible, thereby limiting the choices of government representatives.

In this paper, several highly negative rhetorical commonplaces that emerge frequently in US foreign policy debates regarding Japan and China are analyzed. Note that these commonplaces sometimes indicate contrasting interpretations about Japan and China, however.¹³ Since rhetorical commonplaces are shared *weakly* at an intersubjective level

American Views of China and India (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1958) in regard to US foreign policy toward mainland China and Taiwan.

⁶Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: ‘The East’ in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

⁷‘Constructionism’ often is referred to as ‘constructivism’ in international relations (John Shotter, *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life Through Language* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993)).

⁸Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, ‘Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric’, *European Journal of International Relations* 13, 1 (2007): 42.

⁹John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5; emphasis in original.

¹⁰David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 8.

¹¹ Krebs and Jackson, 44-45.

¹²Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 28-29 and 44.

¹³First, note that there are so many rhetorical commonplaces deployed in US foreign relations with China and Japan that only certain ones can be analyzed here. Second, the focus here is on the constraining power of such arguments. While it is impossible to know what motivates individual policymakers, one can use rhetorical debates to examine the bounding effects upon public justifications of communal policy choices.

among a given public—if they were shared more strongly, there would be far less debate over them—these contradictory positions are not surprising.¹⁴

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

To provide a brief history, increasing economic tensions between Japan and the US, two allies, threatened previously strong ties. Ever since the US occupation of Japan after World War II, the two governments had experienced a special relationship, one marked by US military protection of Japan. After several decades of increasing Japanese economic strength, however, many US Americans charged that the Japanese government's unfair trade practices were costing American jobs, perhaps hastening the US's decline in the process. By the mid-1980s, negative stereotypes of the Japanese began to appear in popular books and movies, such as Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun* and the movie 'Black Rain'.¹⁵ Some of the commentary was so severe that Japanese and pro-Japan voices labeled it as 'Japan bashing.' While Japan's stagnant economy in the 1990s eased the strains on this important bilateral relationship, the PRC quickly became the next rising state of concern to the US.

Since the mid-1990s, the PRC increasingly has been portrayed as a potential threat to US American interests and continued global primacy. While initial focus was leveled upon the Chinese government's poor human rights record and substantial military build-up, subsequent attention was paid to other dimensions of the troubled Sino-American relationship, especially the PRC's rising economic strength. Eventually, this commentary was labeled the 'China threat' debate, with a few voices questioning whether 'China bashing' had been substituted for 'Japan bashing.'¹⁶

Unfortunately, several factors make Sino-American relations even more prone to conflict. In addition to substantial trade deficits, the PRC is the most formidable state military competitor to the US, has an appalling human rights record, and is not an American ally. Therefore, these two eras are compared to glean insights for improvement of Sino-American relations and US foreign policy in general. Let us consider first the Japanese situation in more detail.

CRITICISMS OF JAPAN

It was difficult in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s to find a balanced treatment of the US-Japan relationship. As Stephen D. Cohen noted, most '[a]nalyses are colored by underlying assumptions, whether of a Japanese economic conspiracy or sour grapes by a

¹⁴Ibid. 28. 'Intersubjective' means that meanings are shared commonly among a group and therefore beyond the contents of individual minds.

¹⁵John Schwartz with Joshua Hammer, Michael Reese, and Bill Powell, 'Japan Goes Hollywood', *Newsweek* (October 9, 1989): 63.

¹⁶For example, see John Gershman, 'How to Discuss the China Issue without China Bashing', *Foreign Policy in Focus* (May 2000): 1-7; Neil King, Jr., Michael M. Phillips, and Peter Wonacott, 'The Fine Art of China Bashing: Senators Fume, Bush Feints—and It All May Come to Nothing', YaleGlobal Online, 31 October 2003, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=2814>, accessed 15 July 2008; and Ronald McKinnon, 'The Problem with 'China Bashing'', *Taipei Times* (13 June 2006), 8.

jealous, fading superpower'.¹⁷ Most strikingly, criticism of Japan came from both the American political right and left.

When it comes to the origins of 'Japan bashing,' this discourse seems to have emerged in the US in the 1980s in response to the prevailing scholarly interpretation of the Japanese government as robustly democratic.¹⁸ Duncan McCargo uses the less polarizing term, 'revisionists,' to refer to those commentators who arose in opposition to this mainstream school of thought, generally represented by Harvard University's Edwin Reischauer and others.¹⁹ As a group, McCargo notes that revisionists reject the claim that they are 'Japan bashers' and actually are rather diverse in their views.²⁰

As probably the most important and sophisticated revisionist to challenge the mainstream interpretation of Japan, Chalmers Johnson argued that the Japanese government was instead an example of 'soft authoritarianism'.²¹ For decades, Japanese political parties aligned themselves closely with powerful bureaucratic and business interests,²² with backroom dealings substituting for open, democratic debate among members of the dominant Japanese political party of the time, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).²³

In addition, the US American military presence and 'nuclear umbrella' protected Japan, allowing the Japanese government to concentrate on its economic development and export strategy instead.²⁴ As part of this development of the 'Japanese miracle,' Japanese leaders

¹⁷Stephen D. Cohen, *Cowboys and Samurai: Why the United States Is Losing the Industrial Battle and Why It Matters* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1991), 7-8.

¹⁸As Cohen suggests, however, emotion and oversimplification were present on both sides of the conflict; there were Japanese 'America bashers,' too. *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹Duncan McCargo, *Contemporary Japan* (2nd ed.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 4.

²¹Chalmers A. Johnson, 'Political Institutions and Economic Performance: The Government-Business Relationship in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan', in *Asian Economic Development—Present and Future*, eds. Robert A. Scalapino, Seizaburo Sato, and Jusuf Wanandi (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California-Berkeley, 1985), 70.

²²Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 68.

²³Even today, political corruption remains a concern in Japan. For example, an independent panel commissioned by the Japanese Diet concluded that the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant partial meltdowns were caused in part by lax safety standards. These inadequate nuclear crisis measures stemmed from long-term collusion between the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and government officials. See Kazuaki Nagata, 'Government, Tepco Again Hit for Nuclear Crisis', *Japan Times*, 24 July 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120724a1.html>, accessed 27 August 2012.

At the same time, however, overall corruption levels in Japan are lower than in the United States. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2011, Japan is tied for fourteenth place whereas the US is twenty-fourth out of 182 regimes profiled, ranked from least to most corrupt. See <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/>, accessed 27 August 2012.

²⁴Richard Holbrooke, 'Japan and the United States: Ending the Unequal Partnership', *Foreign Affairs* 70, 5 (Winter 1991/92): 42; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great*

implemented protectionist measures to shield struggling, new, or promising industries in Japan, or what Johnson refers to as the ‘developmental state.’²⁵ Over time, however, US Americans began to protest the costliness of such commitment to a pacifist ally.²⁶ George Friedman and Meredith Lebard went so far as to predict that the Japanese government would re-militarize soon.²⁷ They even envisioned the possibility of a ‘long, dreary Cold War’ between Japan- and US-led coalitions in the Pacific.²⁸

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ‘CHINA THREAT’ DEBATE

As the Cold War began to end in 1989, Francis Fukuyama and other commentators started to proclaim that democracy had ‘won’ over communism in terms of ideological struggle.²⁹ The violence of the Tiananmen Square massacre in China, however, horrified people across the world.³⁰ From the interpretation of most US Americans, this massacre of peaceful demonstrators proved that the PRC’s leadership was not to be trusted. Indeed, the ability of the Chinese leadership to withstand what Eastern Europe could not arguably made the PRC the logical successor to the former Soviet Union as the most powerful enemy of the US.

Starting in the early 1990s, allegations of Chinese human rights abuses were debated at length in Congress, touching upon the PRC’s policies toward Tibet, Hong Kong, birth control, churches, and prison labor. Furthermore, the Sino-US relationship became more tenuous because the trade deficit started to rise exponentially in the PRC’s favor. In addition, Taiwan’s beleaguered status remained an issue, especially for staunch conservatives still upset by the switch in diplomatic status in the 1970s from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the PRC. By the late 1990s, the classified version of the US Congressional Cox report was purported to provide evidence of extensive Chinese spy activities in the US.³¹ Furthermore, the PRC’s leaders seemed to flaunt international norms regarding nuclear proliferation, arms transfer, human rights, and intellectual property.

An additional issue is that of the PRC’s growing energy needs, as the Chinese government has an on-going interest in keeping a sea-lane transit route open in the South China Sea³² that has led to rising tensions with other countries in the region. Furthermore, the Chinese government also has been laying claim to disputed areas of the East China Sea ever since oil discoveries there in the late 1990s.³³ These territorial disputes have escalated in recent years.

Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1987), 459.

²⁵Johnson, 69.

²⁶Holbrooke, 51.

²⁷George Friedman and Meredith Lebard, *Coming War with Japan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 11.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 321.

²⁹See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

³⁰Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 4.

³¹Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations, 1989-2000*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 364.

³²Kent E. Calder, *Asia’s Deadly Triangle: How Arms, Energy and Growth Threaten to Destabilize Asia-Pacific* (Sonoma, CA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing Limited, 1997), ix.

³³*Ibid.*, 8.

Critics of the PRC

Such books as Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China*, first published in 1997, are representative of the first wave of US American commentators to point out the negative role that the PRC might play in challenging the US' global dominance. *The Coming Conflict with China* was widely available in US American bookstores and provoked a lot of attention. Its sources and perspective are primarily journalistic in nature and do not reflect insights from broader historical, intercultural, or political scholarship. In terms of key China critics, there are notably few scholars of China.

These and other figures at times have used charged rhetoric, echoed frequently in US American opinion and editorial pages, that the PRC is a 'totalitarian' and 'communist' regime,³⁴ with 'fascist' overtones,³⁵ that indicate a troubling similarity to Hitler's rise to power. Moreover, a few commentators even speculated that high-ranking Chinese military figures were behind the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.³⁶ While the latter perspective is extreme, it indicates the difficulty that US government representatives face in justifying why they should work with such a regime.

RHETORICAL COMMONPLACES IN US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD EAST ASIA

'Bashing' the Other

'Bashing' is a rhetorical maneuver that emerged frequently starting in the 1980s in US foreign policy debates regarding Japan, but rarely was defined. If one considers the context of such charges, however, 'bashing' constitutes those interpretations that generally blame other countries for any breakdown in a bilateral relationship and do not seem to consider one's own role in the dynamic. While there are going to be disagreements between governments, the problem seems to be the degree of virulence toward the other. This situation places pressure on one's own political leaders not to 'give in' to the other government. Some might point,

³⁴Those who argue that the PRC is a totalitarian state point out that totalitarianism, like democracy, is an ideal-type concept that is impossible to find in real life. Therefore, the question should be how close particular regimes come to fulfilling a list of criteria associated with the ideal type of 'totalitarianism.' Of course, totalitarianism is of necessity becoming rarer worldwide due to increased access to outside media, especially the Internet. The PRC no longer meets such criteria due to the increasing distinction between state and society (Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 4) as well as the state's lack of relative control over intellectual piracy, Internet use, and other activities.

Furthermore, while some might argue that communism remains the key to maintaining the PRC's legitimacy (see Linz, 77), most China scholars agree that communist ideology has transformed into Chinese nationalism instead. Indeed, it is difficult not to see the degree of change from the central role ideology played during China's Cultural Revolution to the current pragmatic focus on state-led capitalistic development.

³⁵Richard Bernstein and Robin H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 61-62.

³⁶See John O. Edwards, 'China's Military Planners Took Credit for 9/11', 25 September 2002, <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2002/9/24/143618.shtml>, accessed 20 September 2010.

therefore, that ‘bashing’ is populist discourse, which can come from the political left, right, or both. More specifically, the phenomena of ‘Japan bashing’ and the ‘China threat’ argument may be interpreted as two more examples of Orientalism, or the ‘tendency to make essentialist and patronizing generalizations about non-Western societies’.³⁷ At its most extreme, ‘bashing’ seems xenophobic.

What, however, are the criteria for ‘bashing’? This conceptual problem was noted by Masao Miyoshi, who stated in reference to Japan, ‘A basher can be informed or uninformed, analytic or irrational, honest or deceptive; in short, anyone who is less than encouraging, enthusiastic, or euphoric about Japan seems to qualify as one’.³⁸ The charge of ‘bashing’ is problematic because it potentially is tautological, much like other emotion-laden charges. For one, and depending on the context, ‘bashing’ could be a symptom of underlying problems in a bilateral relationship or one of its causes.

Meanwhile, one accused Japan basher, Claude Prestowitz, retorted that the label was ‘a McCarthyist trick to avoid discussion of the issue’,³⁹ and he is correct to point out the rhetorical power of its deployment. After all, the term first emerged as a way to criticize those outside voices that were severe upon the Japanese government. Therefore, given the lack of certainty regarding the term, does ‘bashing’ even matter?

In such a context, ‘bashing’ other countries and cultures may represent a political shortcut, a rallying cry for US Americans to rouse from their apathy and feelings of powerlessness. Moreover, an America that has a foreign scapegoat does not have to inspect its own problems so closely. The idea that Japanese or Chinese trade is costing American jobs and that America’s decline is being hastened by Japanese or Chinese ascendancy is intuitively appealing.⁴⁰

At a policy level, such rhetoric is yoked to notions of national security, whether in terms of the fears of losing technological superiority or providing justification for the expansion of defense budgets to keep ahead of the other state. In the present context, these discursive maneuvers legitimate a resolute, state-centric response in US foreign policy to ‘stand up to China’ by funding expanded programs in such areas as defense, cyber-security, and intellectual privacy.

Even so, such rhetoric can be highly destructive to a bilateral relationship, poisoning the atmosphere during controversial negotiations to the point that positions become entrenched and tensions escalate. In sum, ‘bashing’ other countries may suffice politically in the short-term, but it ultimately is misguided, diversionary, and potentially destructive.

Furthermore, ‘bashing’ may have the unintended deleterious effect of fueling nationalism and even militarism on the other side. In the 1980s, some Japanese charged that “Americans started out talking about rules, but now are switching to results. Many Americans assume that if they do not keep winning, the whole system must be ‘unfair’”.⁴¹ Some Chinese have raised

³⁷Duncan McCargo, *Contemporary Japan* (2nd ed.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 7.

³⁸Miyoshi, 65.

³⁹Schwartz et al., 63.

⁴⁰Ellen L. Frost, *For Richer, For Poorer: The New U.S.-Japan Relationship* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1987), 10.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 18.

similar complaints, including those living abroad in areas with full access to Western free press.

In 1989, a bestselling book, *The Japan That Can Say No*, caused a stir. Co-written by Japanese Diet member and ultra-nationalist Shintaro Ishihara, the book's authors argued in part that the Japanese should not cave in so quickly to the demands of their American allies. Meanwhile, during the similar period of 'China bashing,' a group of Chinese nationalists wrote a bestseller that echoed Ishihara's work, entitled *The China That Can Say No*.

Outmaneuvered in Negotiations

Given this lack of trust in the other, it is not surprising that some Americans fear that the US government is not skilled enough at bilateral negotiations. Many US American commentators charged that the Japanese government kept all foreign companies locked out of its domestic market, would negotiate 'behind the scenes' instead of face-to-face, and even would 'lie' instead of saying no to certain demands. Even when Japanese automobile plants were built in the US, some claimed that it confused members of the US American public, co-opting many of those who previously had believed strongly in 'buying American.'

Furthermore, the advice given to American negotiators in the 'Japan bashing' and 'China threat' eras has been strikingly similar. For example, most American commentators advocated using 'unrelenting pressure' against Japan,⁴² including those who indicate that some sensitivity toward the Japanese is necessary. Indeed, the tendency to adopt this strategy was summarized by Carla Hills when she said that she had come 'with a crowbar' to bargain with Japan.⁴³

Democracy, Human Rights, and Saving the Other

One of the key assumptions of most US Americans, particularly citizens and policymakers but also many scholars is that (representative) democracy is the best political system in the world. Even during the 'Japan bashing' era, much of the revisionist critique was that the Japanese government was *not democratic enough*.

These beliefs about democracy have been even more central to the 'China threat' era. Many US Americans believe that universal human rights and the 'rule of law' are positive and should be promoted whenever possible. Many probably share the belief that one US American citizen expressed, that 'Chinese people want to embrace freedom' by throwing off the yoke of oppression under which they suffer in the PRC. This perspective also reinforces notions of US Americans civilizing, salvific, and liberating goals toward various global 'others.'⁴⁴

While completely understandable, the risk is that human rights issues can serve as a 'mote in the eye' of many US Americans. For example, American human rights activists argue that Chinese governmental support of such oil-rich but corrupt regimes as Angola, Iran, Sudan,

⁴²Harrison M. Holland, *Japan Challenges America: Managing an Alliance in Crisis* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), xi.

⁴³Bill Powell with Bradley Martin, Rich Thomas, and John Barry, 'Five Ways to Fight Back', *Newsweek* (October 9, 1989): 68.

⁴⁴Richard Madsen, 'China in the American Imagination', *Dissent* (Winter 1998): 54.

Venezuela, and others is problematic. At the same time, however, most Americans may not realize that the US government receives significant amounts of oil from similarly troubled regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Nigeria, Colombia, Angola, and Algeria.⁴⁵ The point here is that democratic principles are not the central guide of US foreign policy.

Of course, many US Americans are well aware of this troubling gap between cherished American moral principles and official US foreign policy, but many remain enraged by Chinese governmental impunity. This anger may be fueled in part because most US Americans do not know how to effect positive change in the PRC, given the prominent global norm of respecting other states' sovereignty.

Politicization of Scholarship

This issue leads directly into the issue of interpretation, as both the 'Japan bashing' and 'China threat' eras feature contestation in the US and elsewhere over how best to read the other's actions and motivations. For example, the rift between mainstream and revisionist scholars of Japan has not ended so much as it has become less urgent given the Japanese government's shift in fortunes and the concurrent rise of the PRC.

While there have been fewer differences in interpretation among China scholars, there are other factors at work. Given the prevalent disdain for communism and socialism in American culture, scholarly study often becomes politicized by the mere mention of such topics. Moreover, as Andrew Scobell notes, the 'scholarship on China's propensity to use force seems to be shaped to a considerable extent by one's research strategy and the data one taps'.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the same is all too true of analysis of US-China relations in general. There seems to be a gulf between scholars who are acting as ethical absolutists and pragmatists, or between those who are *describing* Chinese behavior versus *prescribing* what is wrong with the PRC. For example, most research on Chinese nationalism is primarily descriptive in nature, but such commentary can begin to sound quite pragmatic and relativistic to someone thinking in moral terms. It is not difficult to imagine such interpretations 'talking past each other,' leading to heightened feelings of frustration especially among those who want to influence Chinese behavior more directly.

Hence, it is unsurprising that many China specialists are dismissed as being 'apologists' for the regime, using a term that is associated with explanation, defense, or justification.⁴⁷ The mere act of trying to explain another culture's behavior can lead to charges of 'coddling' or 'appeasing' the PRC, or perhaps even colluding with the Chinese for personal financial gain.⁴⁸ After all, the PRC's policies clearly are problematic whether the issue is human rights,

⁴⁵ See the U.S. Energy Information Administration's monthly totals of crude oil and total petroleum imports data, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=CH>, 4 September 2012, accessed 10 September 2012; and http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/company_level_imports/current/import.html, 29 November 2011, accessed 6 December 2011.

⁴⁶ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

⁴⁷ Aaron Lazare, *On Apology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

⁴⁸ William C. Triplett asserts, 'Those of us on one side tend to think of those on the other side are either in the pay of Beijing or want to be', as quoted in Steven Mufson, 'Aide's Crusade Is Keeping U.S. Heat on Beijing', *The Washington Post*, 9 April 1999, A26. The Sino-

pollution, or arms proliferation. Even those who know China well tend to criticize it for its failings on these same counts.

Indeed, some journalists, commentators, and international relations analysts have been openly skeptical of China scholars' advice.⁴⁹ This nationalistic distrust undermines attempts by China experts to educate both policymakers as well as the broader public.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Perhaps as a result, little has been accomplished in these difficult bilateral relationships other than temporary solutions to larger problems, with an increase in tension resulting over time. To return to our original comparison, while 'Japan bashing' has subsided in the 1990s and beyond, lingering suspicions between the two states remain that continue to affect relations between them.⁵¹ This situation need not be so. In the past, US Americans had predominantly positive interpretations of both Japan and China, such as during the Occupation period and the difficult years for the Chinese during World War II. Together, these insights remind us that national identities are not fixed but change in response to shifting global conditions. The differing interpretations, however, seem to hinge primarily on significant foreign policy changes as articulated by the US government and Congress.

Several issues make the current US-China relationship more contentious, unfortunately. First, the PRC is, at least officially, a communist state, which raises suspicions among US American citizens and policymakers in particular. Second, it is not and has not been an ally of the US government. Third, the historical reliance upon Protestant missionaries and their offspring as US China experts in the decades after World War II has meant that, to a certain extent, the Sino-American relationship is interpreted through Christian lenses.⁵² Thus, it is no mistake that even today, some commentators talk about 'saving' or 'liberating' China from its repressive leaders, especially since human rights concerns often are framed in similar language.

American relationship is cast in terms of a zero-sum game where the US' loss is the PRC's gain.

⁴⁹Consider the title of two articles, by Fred Hiatt and Jim Hoagland respectively, on *The Washington Post's* 28 June 1998 editorial page: 'So Many China 'Experts'...', '...So Little Knowledge', C7.

⁵⁰A particularly troubling issue in Northeast Asian politics is that it is relatively easy to guess the national identity of an author (whether scholar or journalist) without seeing the person's name and biographical information. Despite noble attempts of scholars and journalists to be objective, national identity and emotions play a significant role in analysis, particularly on matters as contested as these. The general principle is that one tends to valorize and promote his/her country's actions (although there are those who are more critical of their own 'native land').

⁵¹Concerns about the potential return of 'Japan bashing' arose in the wake of the 2010 Toyota recall. See Miho Inada, 'Japanese Media See Trade Tensions in Toyota Recall', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 February 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704107204575038673247395734.html>, accessed 10 September 2012.

⁵²Madsen, 1998, 54.

In general, every US administration will continue the overall policy of maintaining relations with the Chinese government. At the same time, however, US policy matters are subject to democratic debate. Officials are under enormous pressure themselves from the US Congress and public to publicize any negotiating coups over their Chinese counterparts—a countervailing pressure that inhibits the desire to work more cooperatively with the government of the PRC.

It remains troubling that black-and-white negative interpretations of the other seem to prevail in US American discourse as legitimation for foreign policies. When domestic troubles arise, it may be politically expedient to blame someone far away, making it a challenge for such governments and people to respond effectively in a way that can reassure US American citizens. The best that China scholars may be able to do is to continue to provide reasoned guidance to the public and policymakers to keep their minds open to different possible interpretations of available evidence.