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Oliver Turner, American Images of China: Identity, Power, Policy

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1

Oliver Turner's book entitled *American Images of China*, which originated as a PhD thesis, aims to illustrate what American images of China have been and how they have shaped particular realities within which US policy on China has been formulated while potential alternatives have been ignored. Drawing on a wide range of primary source materials, the author is able to demonstrate the power of representations of China in American society in continuously building and rebuilding a China of American design, and the role that American representations of China have played in the making and implementing of American foreign policies towards China.

2

The first chapter, based on secondary readings, provides background for the readers. It reviews the existing wisdom of imagery and policy literatures to establish the core rationale for conducting an investigation into the images of China circulating in American society from 1776 to the present as well as the influence of those images on the advancement of Washington's foreign policies towards China. Noting that not a great deal has been written on these topics, Turner asserts the need to produce a book advancing three principal and interrelated arguments: (1) "Across the duration of Sino-US relations, powerful societal images of China have always provided truths and realities about that country and its people with the United States" (2) "American images of China have always been central to the formulation, enactment and justification of US China policy in Washington" and (3) "US-China policy has always been active in the production and reproduction of imagery and in the reaffirmation of the identities of both China and the United States" (5-8). To build up evidence for his arguments, the author interrogates American images of China in a broadly chronological manner in the next four chapters.

3

In Chapter 2 entitled "American images of China, 1776-1882," Turner examines the initial American images of China. Earliest American constructions of China were of an

Idealised, Opportunity country which developed, endured and later appeared with ubiquitous images of Uncivilised China. Then, this chapter interrogates how the first Chinese immigrants to the United States in the mid-nineteen century represented the catalyst for fears of Threatening China. American images of Uncivilised and Threatening China ultimately led to an almost total ban on Chinese immigration in the late nineteenth century: The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Though there were almost no governmental contacts between the United States and China from 1776 to 1882, ideas about China that circulated in American society had proven influential in enabling American early policy decisions on China.

4

Chapter 3, “American images of China, 1882-1949,” shows that the four main American images of China (Idealised, Opportunity, Uncivilised and Threatening China) which had been constructed in the period of 1776 and 1882 retained the capacity to re-emerge in the years from 1882 to 1949. For instance, the Open Door Notes of 1899 reaffirmed the endurance and importance of American images of Opportunity China. That the United States decided to take part in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion and to request the new Chinese government in 1911 to meet certain prerequisites for diplomatic recognition underscored the endurance of images of Uncivilised China. American images of Idealised China were circulated by individuals like photographer, Arnold Genthe. His photos gave an impression that China was a land of romance and exoticism. Lastly, Threatening China re-surfaced from early to mid-twentieth century by the evil Chinese character Dr Fu Manchu. This chapter also shows that US China policy was still formulated by such dominant American constructions of China and its people. It is noted that US policy towards China still held its influence in the period from 1882 to 1949 and was still based on China’s imagined inferiority and unequal status.

5

The next chapter, “American images of China, 1949-1979,” examines American representations of China from 1949 to 1979. It demonstrates that mainland China’s communist revolution and its involvement in the Korean War were responsible for American images of Uncivilised and Threatening China to re-surface. They formed the justification for the United States to establish the policy of containment towards China. The task of US-China policy to defend American identity from Uncivilised and Threatening China was of critical importance during the Cold War when such American constructions of China became once again very prominent.

6

Chapter 5, “American images of China, 1979-present,” explores American imagery of China from 1979 up to the present day. It argues that after the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, American images of China have become less negative. American representations of Opportunity and Idealised China have re-emerged after a long time of silence during the Cold War. Those constructions of China have played an active role in advancing trade ties between the United States and China. However, such positive China in the American imagination disappeared after the events in and around the Tiananmen Square in 1989 which reproduced the familiar image of Uncivilised China. As a matter of fact, the 1990s saw the re-emergence of Threatening China in American society. Thus, as it is argued in this chapter, while images of China had evolved “to reflect new circumstances, for the most part they shifted within familiar boundaries of reference” (7).

7

The last chapter, “American images of China: The Obama Presidency and beyond,” aims to examine contemporary American imagery of China with a particular focus on Obama’s presidential years (2008-2016). It shows how Americans have developed their image of a rising China whose economic and military power has increased over the years. Such a rising China was particularly tied to American image of Threatening China. This image was automatically associated with the issue of how China ought to be dealt with in the foreseeable future. The Obama administration’s “pivot” strategy towards the Asia Pacific has been seen as its efforts to adjust US-China policy to contemporary American perceptions and interpretations of a rising China. Meanwhile, the author demonstrates how the discourse of “pivot” has contributed to sustaining and reinforcing the image of Threatening China on which the discourse of “pivot” has been grounded.

8

The author has underscored that the four main American images of China (Idealised, Opportunity, Uncivilised and Threatening) have been continuously reproduced and circulated in modern American society. They are influential in forming the justification for the making of US-China policy and in turn US-China policy has actively produced and reproduced American images of China. Those American images of China and US-China policy together reaffirm Chinese and American identities. Finally, it is interesting to note that the societal images under analysis are drawn from three distinct institutions: the journalistic media, the mass media, and art and literature.

9

Oliver Turner’s well-organised and straightforward work is accessible to the general audience and useful to an academic audience. It offers insight into the evolving of American images of China. It is essential to know this evolvment not only to accurately capture the making of US-China policy but also to see the close connection between American societal images of a country and their role in enactment and justification of US policy towards that country. In the case of China, we are indebted to Oliver Turner for his exploration and analysis of past and contemporary American images of China. His work enables us to enrich our knowledge of US foreign policy, American politics, China studies and international relations. *American Images of China* will become standard reading in the related fields.

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