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Racialization in the Rivalry Between the United States and China

Researchers should study whether 'radical Othering' is returning amid intensifying U.S.-China tensions, and if so, what are the illiberal implications?

The Trump phenomenon over the past decade indicates that a substantial portion of the United States can still be politically mobilized by negative stereotypes, both ethnic and racial. As security competition with China intensifies, a key question that researchers must address is to what extent these stereotypes may affect the quality of democracy in the United States, and particularly the treatment of Chinese American people.

In his first term, Trump used racialized tropes—"Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu"—during the pandemic. This language appears to have been correlated with the increase in anti-Asian social media messages and harassment in Trump-supporting counties. As he ran for his second term, Trump deliberately used racial stereotyping of immigrants to mobilize electoral support.

Theory and history suggest we should expect more of this stereotyping in the new administration. External security conflicts are often associated with 'radical Othering' in policy discourse. This is where the ingroup increasingly characterizes itself as exceptionally benign while portraying the outgroup as exceptionally malign. This dynamic leads the ingroup to attribute all security conflicts to the 'Other'—often minoritized groups, migrant workers, refugees, or faith communities.

In an intensifying rivalry, radical Othering also leads to hypervigilance about notional internal threats to the ingroup's cohesiveness. This can manifest as illiberal or discriminatory policing of perceived risks of contamination from the outgroup. There follows alarm about ideas, such as heretical or alien beliefs; the rise of social fears that ethnic or racial groups will 'replace' the majority group; and even the characterization of outgroups as sources of disease. Senator John Cornyn (R-Texas) famously blamed COVID-19 on a caricature of Chinese people's eating of "bats and snakes and dogs."

History offers many similar examples (see Chen memo in this report). In the late 19th century, Chinese immigrants to the United States were often framed as threats to Americans' jobs and health, leading to exclusionary policies. Anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II led to the internment of Japanese Americans. The Cold War era was marked by McCarthyism, which employed illiberal means against perceived ideological threats. After 9/11, Islamophobia intensified, raising concerns over the civil liberties of Muslim Americans. In China, Xi Jinping has attributed internal security threats to cultural and ethnic attributes of Uyghurs to justify highly repressive policies towards them.

Despite these patterns, critical questions remain as to whether and how radical Othering is occurring in the context of the current U.S.-China rivalry, and, if so, whether it is leading to the marginalization of Chinese Americans and other groups associated with the perceived foreign threat. These questions need urgent study.

THEORY AND EVIDENCE

International relations scholars have often argued that inter-state conflicts arise from security dilemmas. When two states are locked in a security dilemma, their leaders and publics misinterpret the other side's defensive actions as signs of aggressive intent. This can set off a spiral of actions and reactions that increase the probability of conflict.

Largely, studies of security dilemmas overlook the role of perceived differences in identity, including the role of racism and its repressive domestic implications. We argue, building on Social Identity Theory, that the dehumanization or even explicit racialization of an 'Other' can intensify a security dilemma, making cooperation and trust even more difficult to achieve.

Due to the deepening of U.S.-China rivalry, the United States may be once again witnessing the sorts of dehumanized and racialized images that frame an outgroup as exceptionally malign. For example, in a public talk in 2019, the then head of Policy Planning at the State Department, Kiron Skinner, argued that the Cold War with the Soviet Union was a dispute "within the

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Western family." By contrast, the competition between China and the United States, she continued, would be uniquely destabilizing because China was "**not Caucasian**."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Michael Anton, the newly selected head of Policy Planning. He stated that "**Russia is part of our civilizational 'sect' in ways that China can never be**." Skinner's chapter in Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership* on reforming the State Department claims that 5,000 years of history means that China's "internal culture and civil society will never deliver a more normative nation." Similarly, Senator Marsha Blackburn once **tweeted** that "China has a 5,000-year history of cheating and stealing. Some things will never change."

History and theory suggest that such discourse is likely to intensify a 'them and us' dynamic. But thus far, the links between the U.S.-China security dilemma, radical Othering, and support for policing against perceived political, social, or physical contamination are largely anecdotal. These links require more analysis.

There is some evidence that a sizable constituency in U.S. domestic politics might be moved by anti-Chinese Othering to support more illiberal policies. For example, **surveys** by the Committee of 100 indicate that almost one third of respondents believe Chinese Americans are more loyal to the People's Republic of China (PRC) than to the United States. The trope of disloyal members threatening ingroup cohesion is common when groups police against threats from an Other. An important research question is whether this percentage will increase as U.S.-China relations deteriorate.

A particularly interesting trope used increasingly since 2017 to delegitimize criticism of U.S. China policy is the term "CCP talking point". A specific version of this is that discussing increased anti-Chinese racism in the United States is a Chinese Communist Party talking point, and therefore presumably illegitimate. However, "anti-Chinese racism" can be both a CCP talking point and an accurate characterization of the effects of radical Othering in the United States.

There has indeed been a rapid rise in references to anti-Chinese racism in **PRC media coverage** of, and CCP criticisms of, U.S. China policy. At the same time, evidence suggests an **increase in racialized anti-Chinese tropes** and behaviors in the United States. The effectiveness of the "CCP talking point" trope in limiting or undermining debate about the Othering of Chinese Americans needs to be tested systematically.

One final feature of note is the role of the outgroup in encouraging radical Othering by the ingroup—inadvertently, indifferently, or even deliberately. For instance, CCP discourses under Xi Jinping have emphasized the obligation of the "**sons and daughters of China**" in realizing the rejuvenation of the nation (see also the Hung memo elsewhere in this collection). This rhetoric aims to mobilize Chinese people worldwide, regardless of their citizenship. As such it blurs the distinction between nationality and ethnicity, and thus increases the threat that some hawks perceive from Chinese Americans. More empirical research is needed, therefore, into the relationship between Xi's statements about the children of China and discourses about Chinese American loyalty.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Theory and evidence suggest that radical Othering and racialization may undermine the quality of liberal democracy. However, more systematic research is needed to test this possibility in the case of U.S.-China rivalry. The following questions should be studied through surveys, survey experiments, and the analysis of political language.

Does simply invoking a "**China threat**" and adjacent rhetoric significantly and durably increase prejudiced views toward ethnic Chinese individuals, both U.S. citizens and non-citizens? And do stereotyped portrayals of China or the CCP—for instance, as cunning or deceptive—reduce or heighten the Othering of Chinese Americans among those exposed to these claims?

Are perceptions of Chinese Americans' disloyalty increasing? If so, in which social, economic, ideological, or self-identified racial groups? Are such perceptions influenced by elite messaging that includes dehumanizing stereotypes of Chinese people?

Do discourses that stereotype Chinese people as having malign traits lead to greater support for limiting the access of Chinese Americans to certain jobs? And do such discourses lead to calls for limits on publications and organizational activities promoting alternative perspectives on China?

As the U.S.-China security dilemma intensifies, answers to these questions could serve as indicators of the potential for political and social discrimination against both Chinese Americans and Asian Americans more broadly.

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FURTHER READING

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