

Are We Under Siege?

US Popular Perceptions of Japan and China in the Post-Cold War Era

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ASIA IN FOCUS

With the end of the Cold War, the early 1990s witnessed a peak in Japan-bashing within popular discourse in the United States. Such sentiments though declined as Japan's economy weakened from the mid-1990s and were replaced by new fears of China following the Taiwan Strait Crisis 1995/6. This article seeks to trace and contrast the perceptions of Japan and China during the 1990s as represented in the techno-thriller genre of popular US literature. The findings will show that Japan was treated as more of an existential threat to America than China due to historical factors and the strong economic presence in the US. This has relevance for interpreting how China will be perceived in the 2020s as its economy becomes more prominent in the US.

Keywords: Japan-bashing, China-bashing, Yellow Peril, Techno-thriller, Post-Cold War Asia

When the bestselling author Michael Crichton released his novel *Rising Sun* (1992), he intended it to be a wake-up call for the United States (US). Critics though felt otherwise, with some considering it to be racist in its depictions of Japanese characters. This was after all a period when Japan-bashing in the US was at its peak as Japanese companies became increasingly present in American life through both consumer goods and the acquisition of property and land. The media was frequently running sensationalist stories about the imminent takeover of the US economy by Japan. In popular culture too, Japanese business was becoming more pervasive, as can be seen in *Die Hard* (1988), *Black Rain* (1989), and *Back to the Future Part II* (1989).

This fever, though, died down as Japan's economy began to slow steadily in the mid-1990s and these companies retrenched back to the homeland or focused on other parts of Asia. At the same time, China began to be seen as a new challenge for the US, notably after the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995/6 (Scobell, 2000). During this period, a new trend of China-bashing began to emerge and reached its peak with the Wen Ho Lee espionage case (1999) and the Hainan Island incident in which US and Chinese aircraft collided (2001), before the events of 9/11 and the War on Terrorism changed focus. With China reoccupying US attention in the 2020s, it is worthwhile to reexamine the experience of the 1990s.

This article seeks to analyze US popular perceptions toward Japan and China during the 1990s. It examines the contrasts that existed in

these two trends during a time when the US was enjoying its unipolar moment. To accomplish this, the article examines popular US techno-thriller novels to consider the extent and nature of Japan/China-bashing and the differences between them. The first section outlines the approach and literature, while the following parts explore the perceptions in techno-thrillers for Japan and China. The last section explores some of the implications of this historical China-bashing for our present moment in the 2020s and the conclusion sums up the main findings.

An Approach toward Identifying Perceptions

When discussing Japan/China-bashing, it is important to be aware of its linkages with the past. Much of it is rooted in the "Yellow Peril" discourse that emerged in the late nineteenth century where popular literature in Europe and America portrayed Asians in negative racist stereotypes, instilling fear and worry in readers. Blue (1999) has covered extensively the growth in "Yellow Peril" discourse among European countries, its impact upon policies at the time, and overall reflection of modernity in European societies. Young (1993) has demonstrated how such discourse has continued throughout history into the Japan-bashing of the 1990s.

Why are techno-thrillers relevant for this study? This genre emerged during the 1980s in which technology, specifically those associated with military applications, were as important to the novel as the characters themselves. Notably,

the authors of such novels are presented through their profile as authorities on the topic that they are writing about. The choice of such a genre of novels for this paper is that they were arguably the biggest selling publications before the routinization of the internet. In fact, Tom Clancy's *Clear and Present Danger* (1989) was the number one selling novel of the 1980s (Elhefnawy, 2009).

Four books have been selected for analysis. For Japan, Clive Cussler's *Dragon* (1990) and Tom Clancy's *Debt of Honor* (1994) were chosen while for China, Dale Brown's *Fatal Terrain* (1997) and Tom Clancy's *The Bear and the Dragon* (2000) were included. There are many other techno-thrillers, for example Stephen Coonts' *Fortunes of War* (1998) or Richard Herman's *The Power Curve* (1997), focused on Japan and China respectively, but the four selected for this article are the more prominent examples on account of the authors' prior performance on the New York Times best-seller list (Clancy's novels topped the list in years of their release).

Previous studies on this topic have used works of fiction or mass media. Regarding Japan-bashing, both Mostow (1999) and Morris (2013) examined Crichton's *Rising Sun*. However, their works are limited to just that novel as well as to the specific case of Japan-bashing. Regarding China-bashing, studies such as Ramierz (2012) and Ramierz & Rong (2012) have sought to identify the negative ways in which China is depicted in the mass media. However, linkages with popular media are more limited. Therefore, expanding the scope to a contrast between negative perceptions toward Japan and China during the same period makes for a valid point of further study.

Perceptions of Japan in US Techno-Thrillers

One of the first novels to cover Japan in the techno-thriller genre was *Dragon* (1990) by Clive Cussler featuring his long-suffering hero, Dirk Pitt. Set in 1993, the plot features a Japanese indus-

trialist, Hideki Suma, who seeks to establish Japan's global dominance by secretly planting nuclear bombs around the world that can be used to blackmail international governments (known as Project Kaiten).

With this novel, Japanese business as represented by Suma is the main adversary and is described in somewhat Orientalist terms, "By Western standards he was short, by Japanese ideals he was slightly on the tall side, standing at 170cm" (Cussler, 1991: 139). Although Suma operates from behind the scenes, the Japanese government is depicted as impotent and only serving his interests. As one US official in the novel puts it, "the politicians don't run Japan" (Cussler, 1991: 250).

The fact that Project Kaiten involves planting nuclear devices inside select units of a popular Japanese car model (subtly described as a "fertilizer-brown" color) and exported by Suma's company is another representation of the threat posed by Japanese consumer goods. Furthermore, the secretive nature of the plot to bolster Japan's power reflects the popular theme at the time that the US has been sleeping as described in Prestowitz Jr.'s *Trading Places: How We Allowed Japan to Take the Lead* (1988). In another case, the reader is presented with popular American trade fears when Congresswoman Loren Smith (Pitt's love interest) grills a Japanese securities executive during a congressional subcommittee on unfair business practices and the acquisition of land: "The rape of California by the Japanese business community will never happen" (Cussler, 1991: 182). It should be noted that in 1989, the year before the publication of the novel, the US government had put Japan under a Section 301 investigation for unfair business practices while in 1987 a group of Congressmen famously smashed a Toshiba radio player on the steps of Congress.

The cultural clashes in this novel though become cruder as they go beyond the world of business. In many cases, Suma never hesitates to express the cultural superiority of Japan which

brings about a vociferous defense by the main characters. For example, when Smith and Pitt are kidnapped by Suma, they are embroiled in a debate about which country holds the moral high ground. Suma contends that the US is a land of criminals and racists because of its mixed cultures to which Pitt counters that Japan is rife with corruption and its own form of racism. Smith concludes, as if speaking for the American reader, that “our society isn’t perfect, but people to people, our overall quality of life is still better than yours” (Cussler, 1991, p.364). Generally, such clashes serve to ferment increased anger at Suma (and by extension such Japanese industry types who the reader is led to believe all harbor resentment over World War II). In many respects, *Dragon* almost serves as an uncompromising rebuke to Shintaro Ishihara and Akio Morita’s *The Japan That Can Say No: Why Japan Will Be First Among Equals* which was released in 1989.

Relatively more subtle in its descriptions, Tom Clancy’s *Debt of Honor* (1994) carries on with similar themes but echoes more the political/military fears laid out in Friedman and LeBard’s *The Coming War with Japan* (1991), which was published in the run-up to the US presidential elections in 1992. This campaign trail was notably marked by tough talk about Japan by all candidates. One of whom, the moderate Democrat Paul Tsongas summed up the political mood of the time by stating “The cold war is over, and Japan won” (Shapiro, 1992). A key concern in Friedman’s book was that with the demise of the Soviet threat, Japan would no longer need to rely upon the US for its security. Given Japan’s growing indigenous military capabilities, the fear was that a trade dispute could become a potential military conflict.

Friedman further points out two factors that would play a role, Japan’s lack of natural resources and the reduction of US forces in the Pacific. Both feature in Clancy’s novel with the limited number of US forces used by Japan as an Achilles’ heel to gain the advantage which would then facilitate

Japan’s efforts to address the shortage of natural resources. Still, the principal adversary in *Debt of Honor* is again an industrialist Raizo Yamata who takes advantage of a trade war between the US and Japan to install a nationalist prime minister, Hiroshi Goto, and push ahead with a military plan to control the Western Pacific. Although the Japanese military is very much involved in this novel, it is the industrialists who pull the strings.

When *Debt of Honor* was released, there was criticism that the book portrayed Japanese characters in a stereotypical fashion (Buckley, 1994). Such representations seek to create cultural clashes that are very evident in the novel. For example, the hysteria over Japanese firms owning US property is manifested in the fact that Yamata owns large areas of land on the Marianas Islands which is then used as a nefarious justification for military occupation. Elsewhere, Japanese automobiles provoke the initial trade war after safety failures cause the deaths of several people. But perhaps the most evident form of cultural clash is in the depiction of Japanese Prime Minister Goto’s blonde American mistress (like the murder victim in *Rising Sun*) who is the subject of his sexual obsession. This very much mirrors the stereotypical views of Japanese men seeking American women, mirroring power imbalances across the Pacific (Mostow, 1999). As Goto states about his mistress in a blunt fashion, “I love f***ing Americans” (Clancy, 1994: 183). Buckley’s (1994) book review picked up on this depiction and its use to inflame feelings, “It all plays into the crudest kind of cultural paranoia, namely, that what these beastly yellow inscrutables are really after is -- our women.”

Perceptions of China in US Techno-Thrillers

The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996 brought to US public attention the potential for a military conflict with China in the post-Cold War period. In the wake of this crisis, books like Bernstein and Munro’s *Coming Conflict with China* (1997) posited

that China will seek to challenge the US hegemony in East Asia and that Taiwan will be the catalyst in this contest. Reflecting these concerns, Dale Brown's *Fatal Terrain* (1997) is a military-focused techno-thriller novel that depicts China's efforts to retake Taiwan (after it declares independence) and secret US efforts to thwart it. The influence of the Taiwan Strait Crisis is clear in the literal "ripped from headlines" introduction which quotes several news articles and analytical reports.

In contrast with the novels featuring Japan, the main adversary in *Fatal Terrain* is an ambitious Chinese military official Sun Ji Guoming who puts into place a deceptive and subtle plan to take over Taiwan. The first point to note is that the conflict is entirely political, in the opening scene, Taiwan formally declares independence, which pushes Sun to implement his plan. In this respect, there are no shadowy industrialists pushing around impotent political leaders nor are there any leadership changes, the communist party is very much in charge. Even the military figures profess complete loyalty to the leadership despite their own secret maneuverings.

The plan to take over Taiwan is portrayed in *Fatal Terrain* as deceptive and cunning (secretly disabling US aircraft carriers or false flag attacks). Evidently this approach is rooted in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, which the character Sun Ji Guoming frequently quotes from as if a religious text. When the novel was released, *The Art of War* was familiar among American audiences, particularly in business circles where it was associated with secretly gaining the upper hand against rivals. Brown in his novel simply uses *The Art of War* to understand how China would be able to take on the US given the obvious military power disparity. This was in line with the strategic culture approach in academia that was put forward by Alastair Ian Johnston's *Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy* (1995). Moving away from traditional measures of power competition (economic or military measures), Johnston posited the importance of cultur-

al thinking for China, for whom the international stage was perceived as zero-sum and therefore required more deceptive measures to gain the advantage. This makes sense for *Fatal Terrain* as the Chinese military is generally depicted as technologically inferior, especially when compared to how the Japanese military was portrayed in *Debt of Honor* or even the private security forces in *Dragon*.

Tom Clancy's *The Bear and the Dragon* (2000) moves beyond strategic culture to more civilization conflicts à la Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. While it is like *Fatal Terrain* in that it portrays ambitious political figures seeking to expand China's power following Taiwan's independence, much of the novel is devoted to a clash between the US and China over human rights. It should be recalled that human rights was a prominent theme in American popular discourse during the late 1990s. The perils of Richard Gere over his support for Tibetan issues were well publicized and were further reflected in his film *Red Corner* (1998). Brad Pitt also found himself in hot water with Chinese authorities when he starred in *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997).

The key event regarding human rights in the novel is the killing by China's security forces of the Vatican's representative who was trying to stop a state-forced abortion of a Christian woman. The main protagonist of the novel—Jack Ryan who is the US president—responds to this incident in a press interview by comparing China's one-child policy to Nazi Germany, stating "Both countries shared a view of population control that is antithetical to American traditions" (Clancy, 2000: 449). Later in the novel, there are frequent references to China as uncivilized with regards to human rights, such as when Ryan discusses with his officials about granting China preferential trading rights, "And there's no way I was going to offer them MFN anyway, unless they decide to break down and start acting like civilized people" (Clancy, 2000: 445). Another key character is the CIA field officer

Chet Nomuri, whose inner monologue descriptions of China only serve to reinforce the civilizational differences, “China was an ancient land with an ancient culture, but in many ways these people might as well have been Klingons as fellow human beings, so detached was their societal values from what Chester Nomuri had grown up with” (Clancy, 2000: 154). One of the overriding images brought on by such depictions of China’s human rights is that the US holds the moral high ground as the world’s dominant power. Still, it is worth keeping in mind that at the time of its release, press reviews criticized Clancy for racist portrayals of Chinese characters (Fretts, 2000).

Later in the book, China seeks to acquire Siberia with all its mineral wealth from a weakened Russia but is thwarted when the plot is leaked. At this stage, the US moves to support Russia’s membership to NATO so that it can defend against China’s invasion. In the build-up to the conflict, there are many analogies to the horrors of the Nazi past. A notable example is when Ryan makes a visit to Auschwitz following Russia’s ascension to NATO and symbolically makes a vow to himself for it to never happen again. Thereafter, the US military ships out to Siberia to help defend against China’s invasion force. Still, unlike *Debt of Honor* where the Japanese military is technologically advanced, China’s military is comparatively weaker. In one scene the US Air Force even wipes out an entire army unit with a few stand-off bombs and in the final scenes where China’s desperate leadership launches its nuclear ballistic missiles at the US, they are all intercepted without any damage. China is never seen to gain the upper hand or weaken US power significantly. Thus, while it is portrayed in the novel as the ‘other’, it is still not a serious economic or military threat to the US supremacy.

Implications for US–China Relations in the 2020s

When looking at the current relations between China and the US, two implications can be

drawn from this popular discourse during the post-Cold War period. The first is that Japan-bashing was very much rooted in a historical setting associated with World War II, thus it stirred deep emotions in the US at the time. By contrast, China has little historical connection to war with the US, the only period of direct fighting being the Korean War (1950–1953) which is not well remembered in the US.

Despite the lack of historical context in US–China relations, the COVID-19 pandemic may be creating a similar negative sentiment given the way in which it has led to an increase in anti-China perceptions mainly centered around the handling of the pandemic and even lab-leak theories. This trend is captured in the Pew Research Center’s opinion poll on China’s image which reveals a marked increase in negative views among Americans since 2020, with almost 82 percent of respondents expressing “unfavorable opinion” (Silver, 2022). It is interesting to note that this has not been reflected in popular culture. Throughout the 2010s, Hollywood has been notably muted in its portrayal of China. Given its interests in the Chinese market as well as the need to attract investors, Hollywood films have stayed away from any political topics regarding China and has even been showing a more positive side to the country (Schwartzel 2022). This is a notable difference from how Japan was portrayed in 1980s and 1990s in both Hollywood and the novels examined here.

The second aspect is in the omnipresent reach of Japanese companies in the US as well as the perceived threat of Japan to US territories in the Pacific. By contrast China’s interests so far remain limited to its periphery. In the novels of the 1990s, China was seen as a relatively backward aspiring power. Its military was no challenge for the US while its economy was seen as dependent on American support. Even its nuclear deterrence failed as a direct threat. Contrast that with the final scene of *Debt of Honor* in which a Japanese airline pilot, who lost his brother in the conflict,

flies his 747 into the Capitol building wiping out much of the US government as a form of revenge.

Looking at the 2020s, the story is very different. China has a much larger economic presence and firms like Tik Tok or Huawei are provoking similar debates as there was with Japan. While the developments in China's military technology such as 'carrier-killer' missiles or stealth fighters are drawing concern from US observers about how the US should maintain its advantage (Bateman, 2022). Furthermore, the Trump administration took a tougher approach to trade while the Biden administration has continued this and has even announced unprecedented restrictions on the export of US microchips to China. It is interesting then to note that although US-China relations in the 2020s lack the historical sentiment of US-Japanese trade conflicts of the early 1990s, they are emerging to be as fierce in terms of policy tools adopted and the increase in negative perceptions.

Concluding Remarks

These novels reveal much about US perceptions in popular novels toward Japan and China during a period of seemingly unbridled American confidence. Culture clashes are a prominent theme, whether in business terms or military aspects. In each case, the US is generally shown to be superior, although with Japan the balance is more even. Furthermore, regarding Japan there is the overall hint that America has been caught sleeping as was a popular theme in the broader non-fiction literature. In particular, the idea that US military cutbacks and withdrawal of forces in the Pacific has weakened its power in the region both as a deterrence and response. Clancy makes a particular point about this in *Debt of Honor* where a weakened military posture in the Pacific as well as nuclear disarmament is exploited by the Japanese industrialists to expand their power. However, this is not so evident regarding China, which is depicted as a plucky, but not serious, challenger.

This is where the real difference between how

Japan was perceived in early 1990s and how China was viewed in the mid to late 1990s becomes evident. Japan was seen to be more of a direct threat compared to China. Japan's economic dominance is not only depicted as eroding US power but is frequently displayed to be encroaching upon the American way of life through the acquisition of property and iconic landmarks or even entire states (Hawaii, California, or Saipan). Many of the Japanese industrialists in the novels perceive of their own culture as far superior and even wish to almost change how Americans live their lives. The clearest example of this is the Japanese securities chief in *Dragon* who comments, "Since the United States is in a state of decline and my nation is rising at an incredible rate, perhaps you should consider accepting our methods over yours. Your citizens should study our culture in depth. They might learn something" (Cussler, 1991: 181).

This contrasts with China which is not only portrayed as a weaker country but also offering little that Americans might wish to emulate while its economy has minimal impact on their everyday life. For example, whereas Japanese cars are omnipresent in *Debt of Honor* or *Dragon*, the only goods flowing from China to the US in *The Bear and the Dragon* are Barbie dolls, which is, after all, a US brand produced using cheap Chinese labor. In fact, the distance between the US and China is alluded to by Sun Ji Guoming in *Fatal Terrain* who explains "I have studied the *tao* of the American military, and I have examined our *tao*, and my studies conclude that the Americans have no desire for prolonged battle in Asia" (Brown, 1997: 55). In other words, the US is more likely to fight a war with Japan over the Marianas Islands (US territory) or economic control of California, but less likely to launch air strikes to defend 'distant' Taiwan.

The sense of a direct threat posed by Japan is reinforced by linking with the past which would suggest that the conflict between the US and Japan has been unceasing since World War II. In *Dragon*, this is evident in the opening scene in

which at the end of World War II, a third US bomber carrying an atomic bomb is downed off the coast of Japan. At the end, Dirk Pitt recovers this weapon in a submersible and uses it to destroy Suma's secret base. The connection with World War II is also relevant in Suma's background as it is hinted that his motivations are in revenge for Japan's defeat in World War II.

Similarly, in *Debt of Honor* Yamata's parents committed suicide as US Marines advanced on Saipan during the closing stages of World War II. It is their memory and loss that Yamata dedicates his efforts to in the opening scene of the book and sets up the story of historical revenge, while also providing the title of the book. In contrast, in both novels, China is seen to be bitter about the post-Cold War situation that is not in their favor, mainly regarding Taiwan, but it does not extend to some unceasing historical conflict or revenge. Instead, the focus is on political or cultural differences, *The Bear and the Dragon* in particular highlights the civilizational conflict over human rights. But still there is a greater power disparity between the two while the military conflicts occur on China's periphery. Is the narrative different today? It could be argued that US-China relations in the 2020s is perhaps closely resembling that of Japan in the 1990s, the power gap has decreased while trade issues are fraught. The key question, though, is whether the negative sentiment toward China brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will be a temporary trend or permanent mindset. This will need to be closely observed in the popular media.

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