

'House of Cards' and the Depiction of America's China

Written by Ben Coulson

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BEN COULSON, JUL 1 2014

In response to the second season of the US remake of *House of Cards*, a flurry of articles appeared in various outlets pondering the accuracy of China's portrayal. This includes discussion on how the show indicates the role of Chinese soft power, is an accurate portrayal of domestic US politics, how the show deals with issues of race and whether or not it represents an accurate portrayal of China and issues in the Asia-Pacific. The writers, praised for "doing their homework" by one outlet, met with numerous China specialists including Xiaobo Lu of Columbia University who commented that he "though, overall the writers were successful in putting in the China storyline with a mix of sensational fiction and possible reality".

What makes the show potentially useful for approaching US understandings of China is through Roland Bleiker's aesthetic delineation of how representations of the real constitute the site of politics. The level of popular consumption and political attention paid to the show indicates not only the symbiotic relationship between popular culture and 'real' world politics but also offers the possibility for exploring how certain 'Chinas' have become familiar and embedded in US political discourse. Outlining a way forward for the study of world politics and popular culture Cahir O'Doherty has called for further engagement "critically and academically with cultural artefacts, cultural theory, and cultural history". This post is one possible response to that call.

The second season of *House of Cards* revolves around US Vice-President Frank Underwood and his relentless pursuit of political power in the crudest sense of the term. The China story line deals with his back channeling scheming with a corrupt Chinese billionaire businessman Xander Feng, who claims to act as interlocutor to various levels of the Chinese political structure. The show's main star and a producer, Kevin Spacey observed that the introduction of the China subplot reflected the growing prominence of Asia in the coming future and that China "will experience positive transformation and change".

A certain number of China tropes circulate through the narrative arc of the season, indeed many of the plot points draw loosely from recent US-China controversies. For instance, the show features: the depiction of a sexualized and fetishized other through the hiring of male and female sex workers by Feng, a US casino laundering money to fund a congressional super PAC, Feng alludes to plotting with members of the Chinese government to force a more liberal financial policy as well as issues of cyber-theft, currency manipulation, trade dispute involving rare earth minerals, escalating tensions in the East China Sea. Notably Barack Obama has reportedly joked in reference to Underwood, "this guy's getting a lot of stuff done... I wish things were that ruthlessly efficient". One of the writers of the show Kenneth Lin remarked that, "when we created the story lines, we were certainly keeping our eye on what was happening (in China), and the happy result I believe, is a story that earns its relevance by resonating with the headlines". Lin goes further in an interview by observing that *House of Cards* "is an exploration of power at the highest levels. Today you can't tell that story without considering China". He also describes "Feng's character as a fairly new arrival to the world stage" and indicates that the introduction of Feng, engaged in erotic asphyxiation with an American man and woman, was merely a "powerful man who lives on the edge while testing and redrawing boundaries".

China is characterized as a spectral force of corruption and embodied by the corrupt business man Xander Feng, *House of Cards* updates yellow peril anxiety for a 'rise of China' world. In behavior by no means to unique constructions of China, Feng has escorts on call, drinks glasses of \$5000 whiskey and deals with Casino owners to

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launder money. Interestingly, Feng is depicted in similar fashion to the corrupt and sinister American politicians on the show but is nevertheless initially portrayed in line with historical tropes regarding a mystical orient. Kurt Campbell, former US assistant secretary of state has observed (paywall) that “permeating the script is a nervous sense that China is on the rise and here to stay”.

Even if it is more a reflection on domestic US politics, the show indicates a new and emerging discourse of China and its growing role in the US material and ideational construction of itself. Significantly, there is growing acceptance that China can have an influence on the domestic in US politics. For instance, Kaiser Kuo has suggested that the bridge plot may have been an allusion to a 2011 story regarding the Chinese construction of a bridge in San-Francisco. Significantly, though many Chinese companies are winning construction opportunities in the US, these may be due to cheaper costs and their ability to do work that US companies simply cannot.

In one of the more illuminating scenes Underwood admonishes Feng during a secret meeting where Underwood is bargaining with Feng to finance a bridge project in Long Island, a key Presidential pledge, in return for a deal on a US lawsuit against China for currency manipulation. During a testy debate over the nature of warfare as an allegory to political power and influence, Underwood chastises Feng declaring that “Mao is dead and so is his China”. In an intriguing juxtaposition, this scene occurs while Underwood is presiding over a re-enactment of a US Civil War battle, an event of theological importance in US history, while declaring a similar so part of Chinese history as being over. This China that Underwood is referring to, a communist and pernicious power in the US imagination has indeed been the dominant construction of China up until Nixon's opening with traces of this legacy resurfacing every once in a while. However, under Obama, China holds a more integral role to the American way of life. Mao's China may indeed be “dead” but what has replaced it in the US imagination is merely an updated form of orientalism.

The show presents a nuanced (even if in hyperbolized terms) understanding of China and circulates growing American concerns with China through a financialized orientalism. Outlining the American 'pivot' to Asia, Obama's Secretary of State Hilary Clinton bluntly stated the mutual dependency between the US and China, “a thriving America is good for China and a thriving China is good for America”. The question remains though on whose terms this relationship is set. For all the mimetic intentions of the writers of *House of Cards* and although a threat-opportunity dichotomy may still dominate contemporary US imagination of China, the second season represents a well-lit aesthetic avenue with which to explore how understandings of China may be distinct to previous incantations of a Yellow Peril.

About the author:

Ben Coulson is an Economic and Social Research Council funded doctoral student in Politics at Newcastle University. His research provides a genealogy of how China has been problematized in US foreign policy from the mid-19th century until contemporary times.