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China in American Mythology: Mere Competition or Existential Threat?

In American mythology, China is the enemy. We can trace this narrative's origins at least to the Cold War, a period that drove Americans to perceive China as a rising communist threat. Now, tensions between the two countries have intensified with the advent of AI and the Sino-American chip war. On a visit to Davidson, Nicholas Burns discussed his experience working with the Chinese government as the US Ambassador to China under the Biden Administration. He sectioned his lecture into descriptions of military and technological competition and reasons for cooperation in order to paint a truthful but optimistic picture of current US–China relations. Though his message of peace was logical, it fell flat with the audience, perhaps pointing to the prevalent narrative of China as a rival to be defeated.

Ambassador Burns began by discussing military competition between China and the United States. He admitted that the United States Military spends most of its time “on the competitive edge” with China. Burns mentioned only one point of agreement between the two countries on the military front: their conviction that humans, and not AI, must control nuclear power. This statement, meant to be reassuring, came across as underwhelming, though not disingenuous. I was left wondering whether there was not anything better to be said for US–China military relations than a statement of the obvious—nobody wants to see their favorite science fiction movie played out in real life.

Burns then transitioned into his discussion of technology, another competitive front. He halfheartedly praised modern innovation before launching into a series of concerns regarding AI. Since AI has emerged within the private sector, but has increasingly been commissioned for use by both the American and Chinese governments, regulation has become a key issue for both countries. If, in American mythology, China represents deplorable communism and the US stands for all things capitalist and free, then the AI regulation debate poses a challenge to America's cultural understanding of itself. By discussing AI regulation, the former ambassador made the audience aware of an additional danger to America, this one internal. Instead of assuaging his listeners' fears, Burns raised the stakes of competition by introducing a secondary threat to the United States and its identity.

After covering military and technological stressors on US–China relations, Burns discussed cooperation between the two countries in order to support his vision of coexistence. Burns recalled leading productive conversations about carbon emissions, fentanyl policies, and future pandemic regulations with Chinese officials. By sharing personal experiences of diplomacy, the former ambassador made unity with China seem realistic. Then, Burns noted that both President Trump and President Biden have stressed the importance of “living in peace” with China. By appealing to important American authority figures, Burns attempted to further convince his audience of the necessity of peace. Intentionally, the former ambassador mentioned two leaders with opposing viewpoints, hoping to bridge political gaps in order to reach a wider set of audience members. Burns's final rhetorical strategy for promoting peace involved his language and tone, which were subdued and nonconfrontational throughout the first part of the lecture. However, when the discussion turned to the possibility of war between the US and China, he pivoted to strong, intimidating speech; war, according to Burns, would be

“catastrophic,” “irrational,” and “insane.” Burns’s sudden use of strong adjectives served to grab the audience’s attention. His tone, appeal to authority, and anecdotes all emphasized his seriousness about striving for peace with China.

Though Burns’s argument for unity was carefully constructed, he ultimately failed to convince his audience of the possibility of peaceful competition. In the Q&A that followed the lecture, one student asked, “So, how do we win?” The audience instantly burst into applause, and a surge of patriotism overtook the room. Burns did his best to dispel this more aggressive narrative, to no avail. Perhaps his lack of persuasive power stemmed from his argument; his examples of cooperation between the United States and China seemed more like concessions than persuasive instances of partnership. Alternatively, one might simply ascribe the audience’s eagerness to the popular American understanding of China as the enemy. At Davidson, the myth of China as the rival to end all rivals is alive and well, despite Burns’s better efforts.

The former ambassador’s speech, sectioned into different examples of competition and cooperation between China and the US, seemed to me well-reasoned and strongly constructed. As someone with little to no knowledge of US–China relations, I found it a reliable guide to the most topical political issues. However, the lecture failed to achieve its goal of convincing Americans that China should not be defeated or destroyed. My lack of background may actually be an asset in understanding this attitude; the American cultural myth of China as the enemy is so established that it may be impossible to overcome.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

Works Cited

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