

Unfulfilling the 'China threat' prophecy: complicating and expanding Western knowledge production on China

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In the current context of geopolitical tension and perceived hegemonic change between the United States (US) and China, the debate has largely focused on ascertaining China's threatening potential and assessing the latter's material capabilities and/or intentions. However, Western fears of and perceptions surrounding China's rise shape the scholarly and political debate, revealing the 'autobiographical nature' (Turner 2014) of these historically contingent discourses. This panel investigates the interplay between discourses, histories and identities that underpins the current 'China threat' debate. Exploring US, European Union (EU), foreign policy, (state-)media and scholarly discourses, the papers complicate wider Western knowledge production on China, examining how ideas of China as 'dangerous', 'geoeconomic competitor' or 'civilizational Other' have been historically and discursively constructed, reproduced and embedded within global power relations. Rather than treating the 'China threat' as an objective reality or strategic given, the panel explores it as a relational construct that cannot be separated from Western attempts to stabilize identities, anxieties and hierarchies, and which contextualizes China's efforts to project a peaceful identity.

Given the US focus of three of the papers, the panel sheds light on the 'China threat' narrative in the US context, bringing to the fore previously underexplored dynamics of US empire, as well as critiques of the 'New Cold War' paradigm, its assumptions and associated analogies. The panel also goes beyond the US and its deeply influential scholarly debate, complementing the discussion with the case-study of EU actors—mainly firms and industries—and their perceptions of China. To fully flesh out the implications of Western knowledge production on China, the panel also reflects on the Chinese perspective and China's own efforts at self-categorization in light of external threat perceptions.

Collectively, these papers uncover the discursive life of the 'China threat', revealing the co-constitutive nature of identity-formation, threat-making and world-ordering processes. The panel then problematizes the enduring dichotomies that have shaped perceptions of a 'China threat' across historical epochs and geopolitical contexts, while substantiating the implications of this enduring discourse for contemporary politics and policy outcomes.

Track Classification: Critical Alternatives for World Politics