

# National Image Building and Chinese Foreign Policy

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This paper studies national image building as part of Chinese foreign policy, a subject hitherto neglected by scholars of China. First, it traces the various images the PRC government has tried to project of China, revealing both changes and continuities from the Maoist period to the present time. It then compares China's projected national images with others' perceptions of China, explaining the convergence and divergence of images and perceptions. Finally, this article explores whether the projected national images affect Chinese foreign policy behaviour, and if so, how? It draws on both neo-liberal institutionalism and constructivism in international relations theory to provide an answer.

Some [foreign countries] have prejudices or have wrongly believed rumours, therefore what they think about China is not the true image of China. We will try every means to present a comprehensive and real picture of China to the outside world so that you can see the true image of China.

(Zhu Muzhi, Director, State Council Information Office)<sup>1</sup>

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Parker, "New Propaganda Office Pledges 'True Image' of China," *United Press International*, 13 Jun. 1991.

...we will do our very best to educate the public and the Congress about the role China actually plays in working with the United States to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific region. At the very least, these efforts will improve the international image of China and stop the negative tone of public opinion.

(Hill and Knowlton, PR Firm hired by the PRC Government)<sup>2</sup>

While carrying out the overseas publicity work, we should ... make greater efforts to comprehensively brief the world about China ... improve and safeguard socialist China's international images...

(Jiang Zemin, Chinese President)<sup>3</sup>

Since time immemorial political leaders have recognised that images matter. They have tried to promote favourable characterisations and ameliorate unfavourable stereotypes of themselves and the polities they represent. In today's world, where democratisation and the telecommunication revolution have greatly expanded the flow of information, governments everywhere have become especially attentive to their national images.<sup>4</sup> China is no exception. But so far there has been little research on China's national image building.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I make a modest attempt to fill this void by exploring the following questions: What sorts of images has the Chinese government tried to project of China? Are the perceptions of China by others consistent with China's projected images? Do the projected national images have any impact on Chinese foreign policy behaviour?

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<sup>2</sup> Marcy Gordon, "China Fighting to Change Image as Crucial Trade Vote Nears," *Associated Press*, 9 Jul. 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua News Agency, "President Calls for Further Propaganda Work to Enhance China's Image Abroad," *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, 28 Feb. 1999.

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration on national images in international relations, see Michael Kunczik, *Images of Nations and International Public Relations* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The topic of perceptions (and mis-perceptions) has been a central theme in the study of Chinese foreign relations. Scholarly work on this subject has yielded important insights into the formation of China's perceptions of others and others' perceptions of China, and into the impact of mutual perceptions. See, for example, David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Jianwei Wang, *Limited Adversaries: Post-Cold War Sino-American Mutual Images* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). But this literature does not directly address China's national image building.

## China's National Image Building

As indicated by the remarks in the epigraphs, the Chinese government has become quite attentive to China's national image in recent years.<sup>6</sup> Chinese leaders have repeatedly called for the improvement of the country's image abroad.<sup>7</sup> To coordinate its image-building efforts, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established an Overseas Propaganda Department under the Party Central Committee in 1990, and the Chinese government established a new Information Office under the State Council in 1991.<sup>8</sup>

As part of its intensified image-building activities, since the beginning of the 1990s the Chinese government has frequently issued white papers on subjects such as on human rights, the situation in Tibet, China's national defence, and the environment (see Table 1). They are designed to publicise and explain to the international community China's positions on these sensitive questions, representing a step forward from the days when the Chinese government brushed aside international criticisms of Chinese policies without engaging the arguments. In addition, the Chinese government has begun to hire international media expertise to polish China's image.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in 1991 it employed the American firm Hill and Knowlton to lobby the US Congress for the unconditional renewal of most-favoured-nation trade status for China. In its bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, the Chinese government hired another American firm,

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<sup>6</sup> The literal Chinese translation of national image is *guojia xingxiang*. While this phrase appears in Chinese publications, more often used is the phrase *guoji xingxiang* (international image), which emphasises the international community as the target of image projection.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in late 1990 China's top leaders presided over an important meeting on overseas publicity. The meeting called for Chinese from all walks of life to help project a favourable image of China to the rest of the world. It required propaganda workers to study the differences between foreigners (and overseas Chinese) and people in China, and to distinguish methods of propaganda for these two audiences. In early 1998 Premier Li Peng wrote to the national overseas publicity conference, calling for improvement in this area of work. At a similar conference in early 1999, President Jiang Zemin called for massive publicity efforts so as to raise China's international stature. He emphasised that the departments in charge of the work should be equipped with advanced information technology and facilities. He asked CCP committees and governments at all levels to provide support for the publicity work.

<sup>8</sup> In 1998 the Party Propaganda Department changed its English name to Publicity Department, even though its Chinese name remained the same.

<sup>9</sup> One study shows that foreign countries using American public relations firms have seen their national images improve in the US. See Jarol Manheim and Robert Albritton, "Changing National Images: The International Public Relations and Media Agenda Setting," *The American Political Science Review* 78, 3 (1984): 641–57. But I have not seen systematic data on China's use of these firms or their results in shaping foreign public opinion.

**Table 1:** *Samples of White Papers Issued by China*

Year of issuance	Title of papers
1991	Human Rights in China
1992	Criminal Reform in China
1992	Tibet — Its Ownership and Human Rights Situation
1993	The Taiwan Question and Re-unification of China
1994	The Situation of Chinese Women
1994	Intellectual Property Protection in China
1995	Family Planning in China
1996	The Situation of Children in China
1996	Environmental Protection in China
1996	The Grain Issue in China
1997	On Sino-US Trade Balance
1997	Freedom of Religious Belief in China
1998	China's National Defence
1999	National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China
2000	China's Population and Development in the 21st Century
2000	China's Space Activities
2001	Tibet's March Toward Modernisation
2001	The Development-Oriented Poverty Reduction Programme for Rural China
2002	National Economy and Social Development of China

*Source:* Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. <[www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn)> [Dec. 2002].

Weber Shanwick Worldwide, to run its public relations campaign. Finally, the Chinese government has sponsored and/or organised cultural events in other countries to help improve the country's image. For instance, in the summer of 2000 China spent millions of dollars and sent cultural groups on a road show in the United States. The director of the State Council Information Office explained the motive behind this undertaking — "I hope some day an American president will say something good about China."<sup>10</sup> In 2001 China reached an agreement with AOL Time Warner to begin broadcasting English-language programmes in the US around the clock, hoping to present Americans with an image of a softer and gentler China.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, "China's US Road Show," *The New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2000: A3.

While the Chinese government has shown increasing enthusiasm and sophistication about public relations work abroad in recent years, national image building is by no means a brand new enterprise for the Chinese. In fact, projecting favourable images has been an important part of Chinese statecraft since ancient times. Just as the imperial rulers cultivated the images of China as the centre of the universe and as a benign hegemon, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has sought from its outset to project a variety of images of the country.<sup>11</sup>

Exactly what sorts of images has the PRC government tried to establish of China? More specifically, what kind of an actor has the Chinese government portrayed China to be in international affairs? In order to answer this question, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of two official series — the *Peking Review* (later renamed *Beijing Review*) and the Government Work Reports (*zhengfu gongzuo baogao*).<sup>12</sup> The *Peking Review* was launched on 5 Mar. 1958 by the Chinese government. It was the first and, for many years, the main weekly newsmagazine directed at foreign readers. Its purpose is for “foreigners to know about China's policies and study China's political situation and development trends.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to English, it is also published in French, Japanese, German, and Spanish. The premier delivers the Government Work Reports to the National People's Congress. Beginning with the first one in 1954, such reports have come out from time to time, in intervals ranging from one to eleven years. They are directed at both the domestic and international audiences. Given how limited foreign access to China was until the last 20 years, it is safe to assume that these work reports constituted a major

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<sup>11</sup> Many scholars of imperial China have written about its images as the Middle Kingdom and a benign hegemon, although they disagree on the extent to which these images were consistent with reality. See, for example, John King Fairbank, ed., *Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Warren Cohen, *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Other official publications aimed at image building include the *China Daily*, *China Reconstructs*, and the *People's Daily*. However, none of them seems suitable for the task at hand. *China Daily* was first published in the late 1970s and thus does not offer data for earlier years. *China Reconstructs* focuses mainly on domestic development in China, and does not shed much light on China's desired images in international relations. *People's Daily* is aimed primarily at the domestic audience and covers a wide range of issues. A random sampling of a reasonable size may or may not produce much information on China's image building *vis-à-vis* the international community.

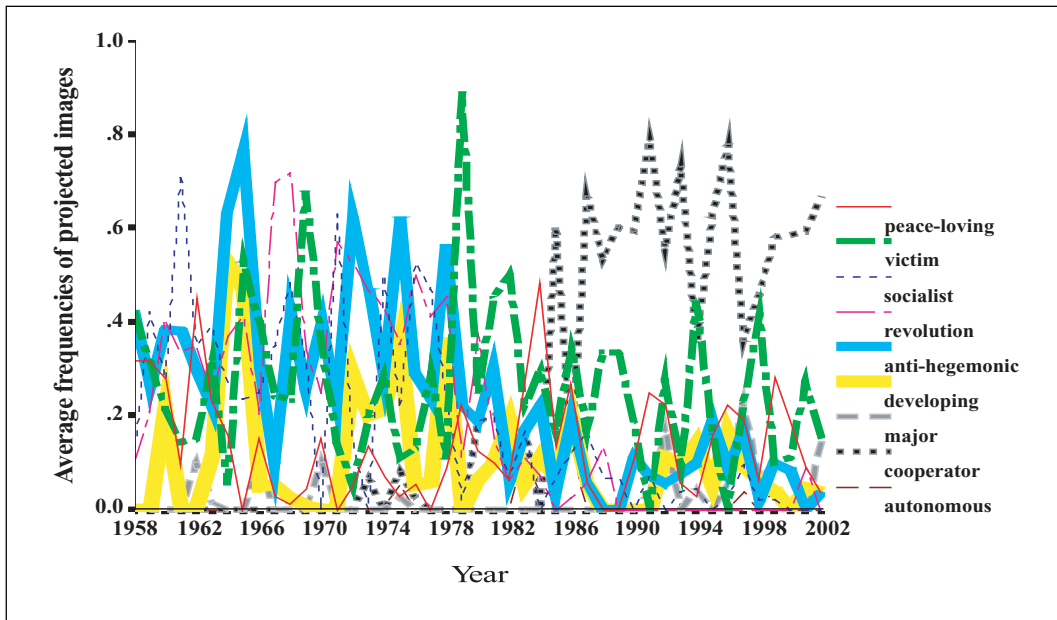
<sup>13</sup> This is stated on the official *Beijing Review* website. <[www.bjreview.com.cn](http://www.bjreview.com.cn)> [Dec. 2002].

window for China watching and that the Chinese government probably viewed them as such.<sup>14</sup>

Between 1958 and 2002, more than two thousand issues of the *Peking Review* were published. I randomly selected one issue from each year for analysis. Since my focus is on the images of China in international affairs as portrayed by the Chinese government, I coded only articles that have at least one paragraph relating to China’s foreign relations. Between 1954 and 2000, 19 Government Work Reports were delivered and published. I included all of them for analysis and coded sections in each report dealing with China’s foreign relations.<sup>15</sup>

Figures 1 and 2 summarise the results of the content analysis of the *Peking Review* and Government Work Reports given to the National People’s Congress. As these graphs

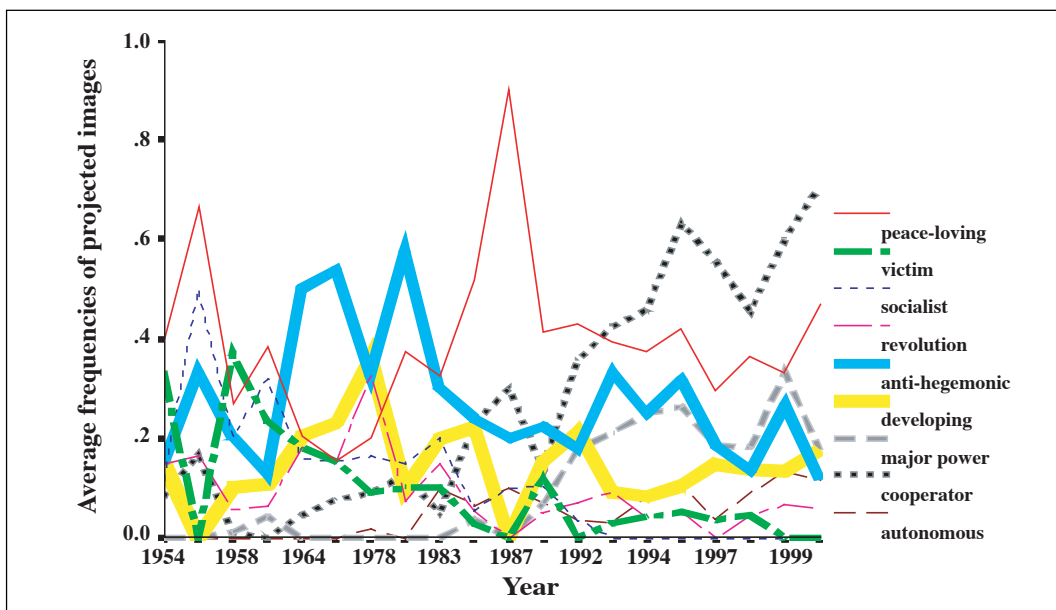
**Figure 1.** *Projected Images*



Source: *Peking Review*, various issues.

<sup>14</sup> My focus here is what images the Chinese government has tried to build of China rather than what images have reached the intended audience. Therefore it is not my concern whether or how many foreigners actually read these documents.

<sup>15</sup> I used different coding units for the *Peking Review* and for the Government Work Reports — paragraphs for the former and sentences for the latter. For both, the unit of analysis was each projected image. Before the formal coding, my research assistant and I did a preliminary test. For the nine image variables, we achieved a high inter-coder agreement, with an average coefficient of agreement of 0.96. Details of methodology and coding scheme are available from the author.

Figure 2. *Projected Images*

Source: Government Work Reports, various issues.

show, they projected similar images of China as an international actor. According to these two documents, in the last forty-plus years, the PRC government has tried to build the following images of China in international affairs: a peace-loving country, victim of foreign aggression, socialist country, bastion of revolution, anti-hegemonic force, developing country, major power, international cooperator, and autonomous actor. These data also indicate that over time, there have been both changes and continuities in the images projected of China by the Chinese government. On the side of continuity, the government has consistently — though with different levels of vigour — pursued the images of China as a peace-loving nation, a victim of foreign aggression, an opponent of hegemony and a developing country. On the side of discontinuity, the Maoist era saw the government emphasising the images of China as a socialist country and supporter of revolution. During the reform period, the government has de-emphasised those images. Instead it has highlighted the images of China as an international cooperator and a major power.

Now that we have determined what sorts of national images the PRC government tried to pursue, we can move on to address the remaining questions. Do others' perceptions of China correspond with China's projected images? Does image building provide feedback to and as a consequence have any impact on Chinese foreign policy behaviour? While the first question is primarily the concern of the Chinese government, the second should be of great interest to countries interacting with China. The rest of this paper examines each question in turn.

## Image Building and Perceptions

In order to find out if others' perceptions of China correspond with China's projected images, we should compare the country's projected images with the perceptions of China by the public in numerous countries. However, that task is too ambitious for this paper. Instead, I provide only a limited answer to this question by examining how China's projected images fared in one country, the United States.

My assessment of the evolution of American public opinion about China relies on data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.<sup>16</sup> From the Center's online data bank, I found more than 500 survey questions about China from 1954 to 2002. My original intention was to detect American views of China from the answers to those survey questions. But I discovered that because the pollsters framed their China-related questions differently from year to year, it was difficult to aggregate the data embodied in the answers. Instead, I analysed the survey questions themselves, treating their explicit or implicit assertions about China as data on American perceptions.<sup>17</sup> Figures 3–12 show the results of the analysis alongside earlier analysis of China's projected images.

As one can see from these graphs, American perception of China corresponds with some of the images projected by the Chinese government but contradicts others. First, Americans share the view that China is a socialist country (Figure 5). Likewise, Americans generally agree with China's projected images of itself as a developing country and major power (Figures 8 and 9). Second, Americans sometimes view China as exhibiting opposing hegemonic behaviours, but more often they see China as engaging in hegemonic behaviours (Figure 7). They sometimes view China as a victim of foreign aggression, but more often see China as victimising its own neighbours (Figure 4). Third, while China portrays itself as a peace-loving nation, international cooperator, and autonomous actor, Americans think exactly the opposite. According to the data here, they have never seen China as peace-loving (Figure 3). Instead, they frequently regard China as militant. They seldom see China as an international cooperator. Rather, in their view, China is an obstructive force (Figure 10). They have not given much thought to whether China is

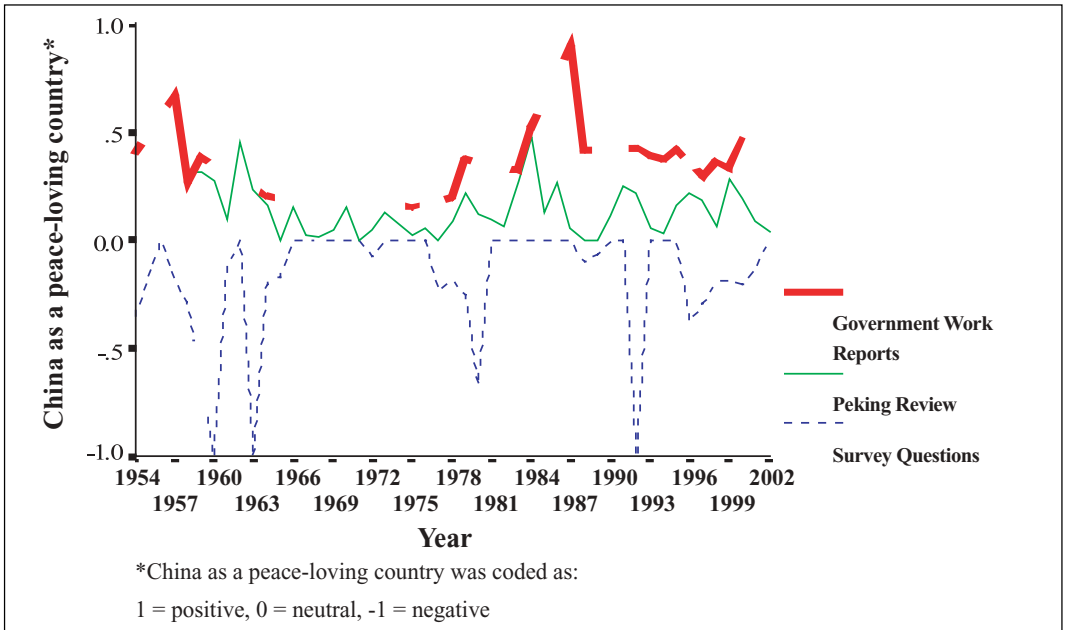
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<sup>16</sup> The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research in Storrs, Connecticut, was founded immediately following World War II, and maintains a database of public opinion surveys conducted by academics, media organisations, and commercial pollsters dating back to 1935.

<sup>17</sup> For example, I coded the following question as perceiving China as socialist, militant (opposite to peace-loving) and a major power: "Red China has exploded another atomic bomb. Do you think we should try to negotiate an atomic test-ban treaty with them?" I coded the following question as perceiving China as militant (opposite to peace-loving), obstructive (opposite to cooperative) and socialist: "Do you agree that the US should come to the defense of Japan with military force if it is attacked by Soviet Russia or Communist China?" Details of methodology and coding scheme are available from author.

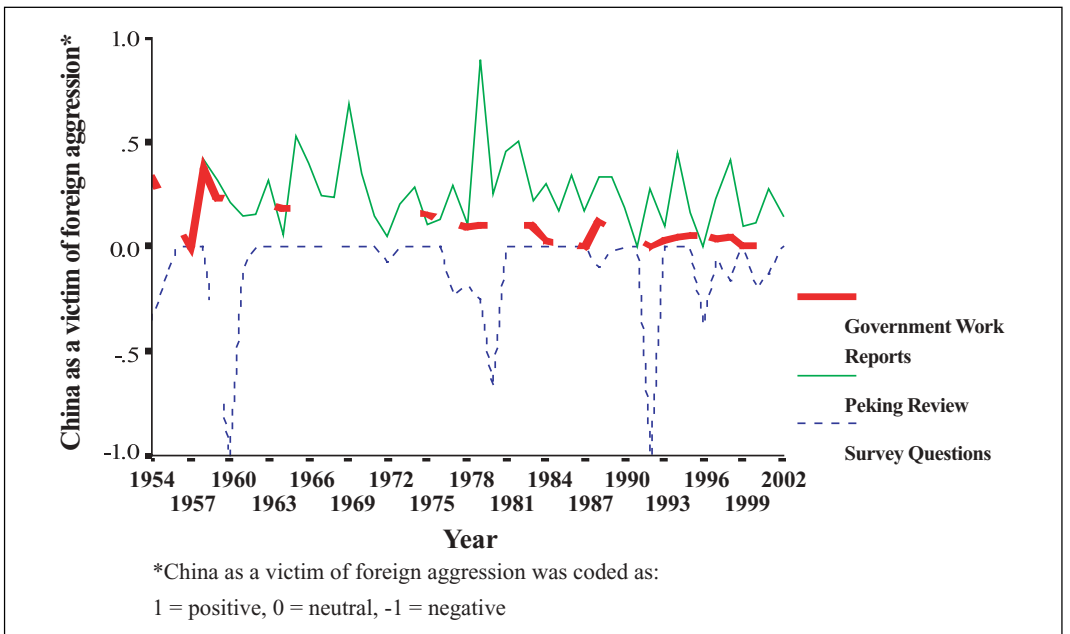


Figure 3. Images and Perceptions (1)



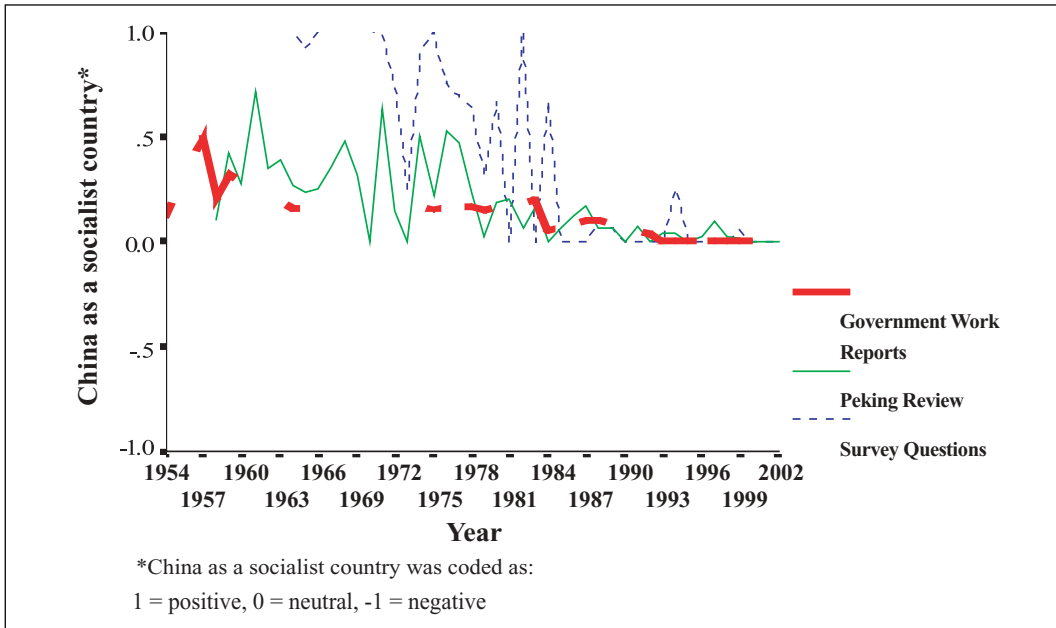
Note: The lines are broken due to unavailable data: Government Work Reports were delivered in only some of the years, and survey questions did not always contain perception data of a given image.

Figure 4. Images and Perceptions (2)



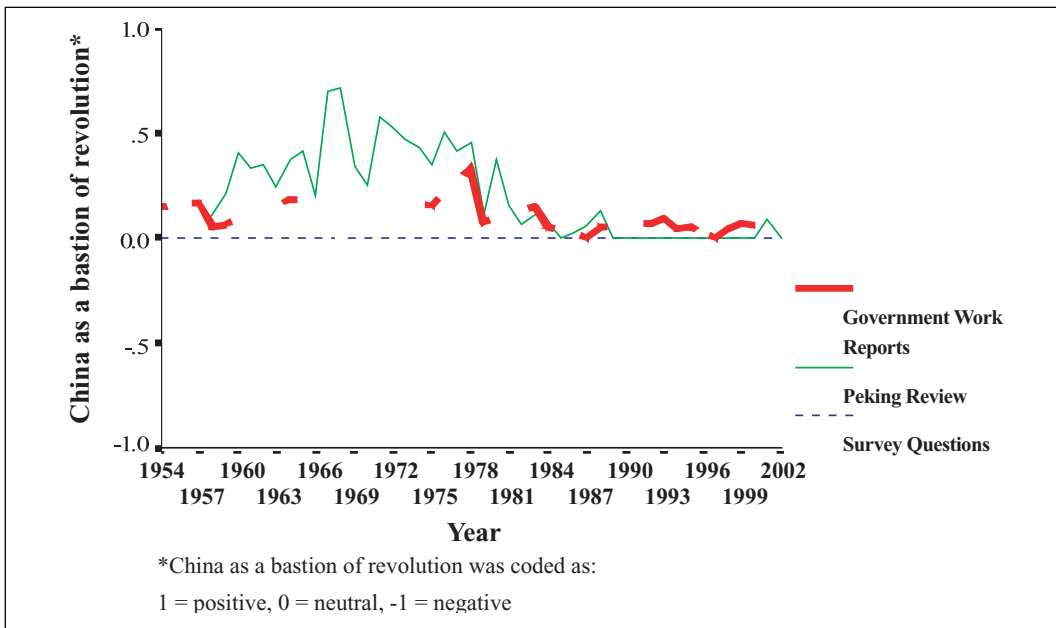
Note: See note to Figure 3.

Figure 5. Images and Perceptions (3)



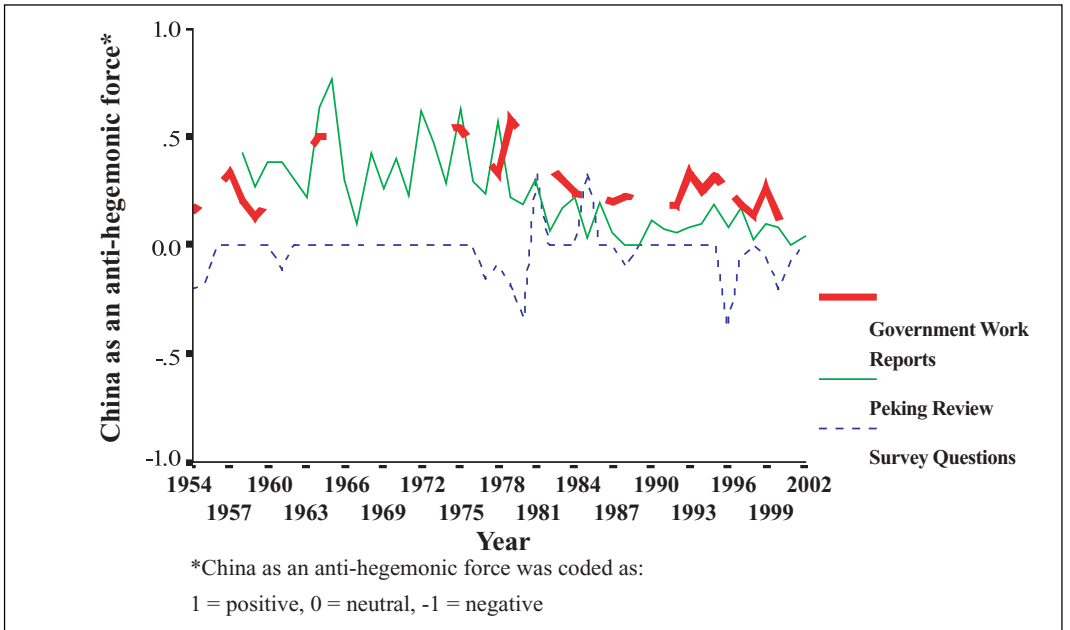
Note: See note to Figure 3.

Figure 6. Images and Perceptions (4)



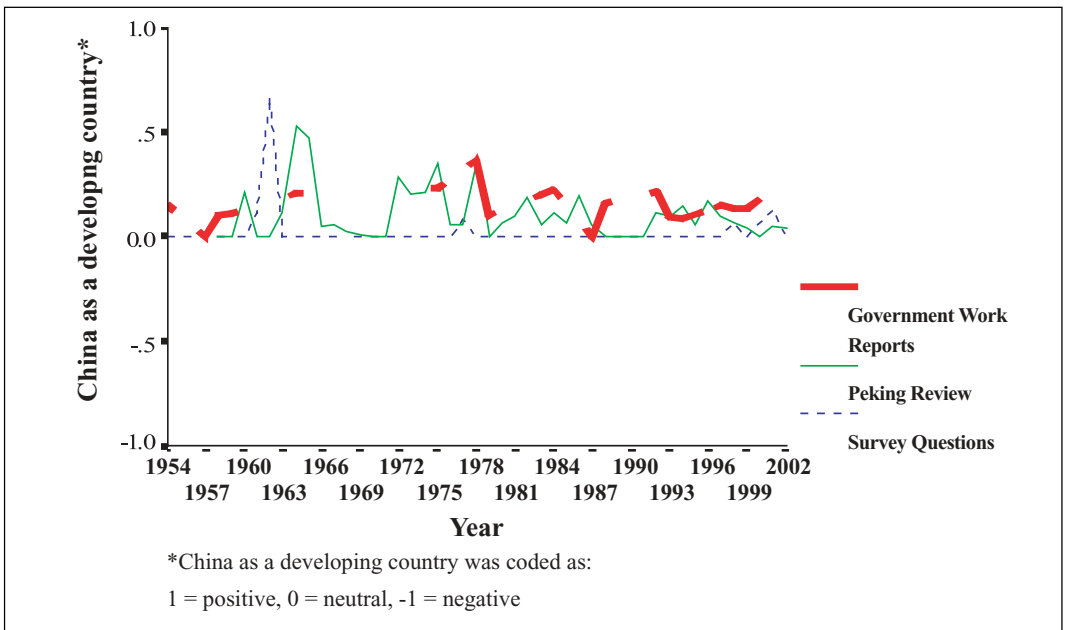
Note: See note to Figure 3.

Figure 7. Images and Perceptions (5)



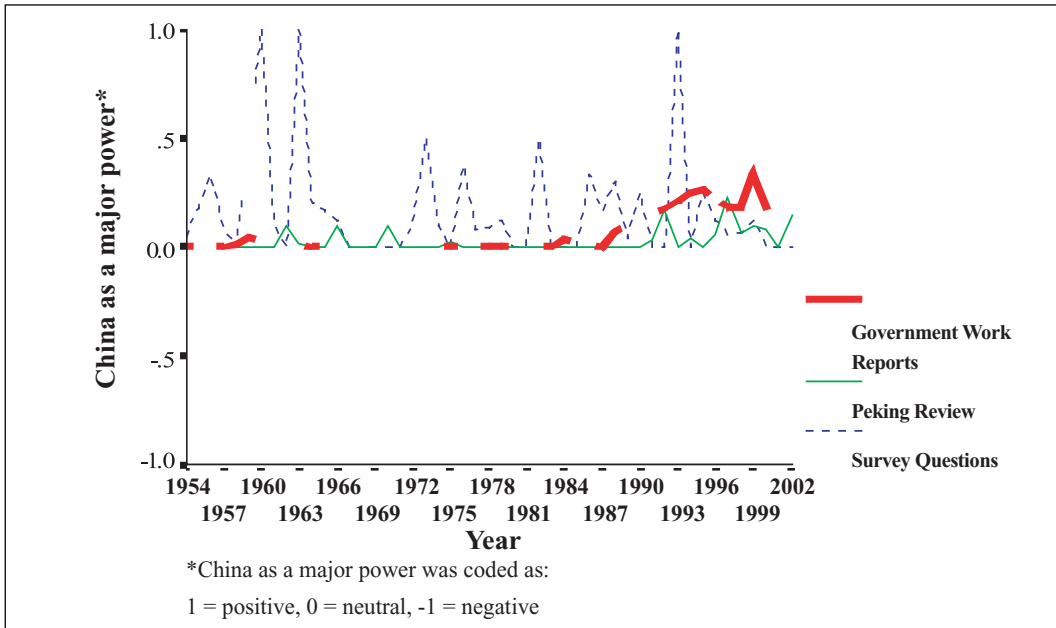
Note: See note to Figure 3.

Figure 8. Images and Perceptions (6)



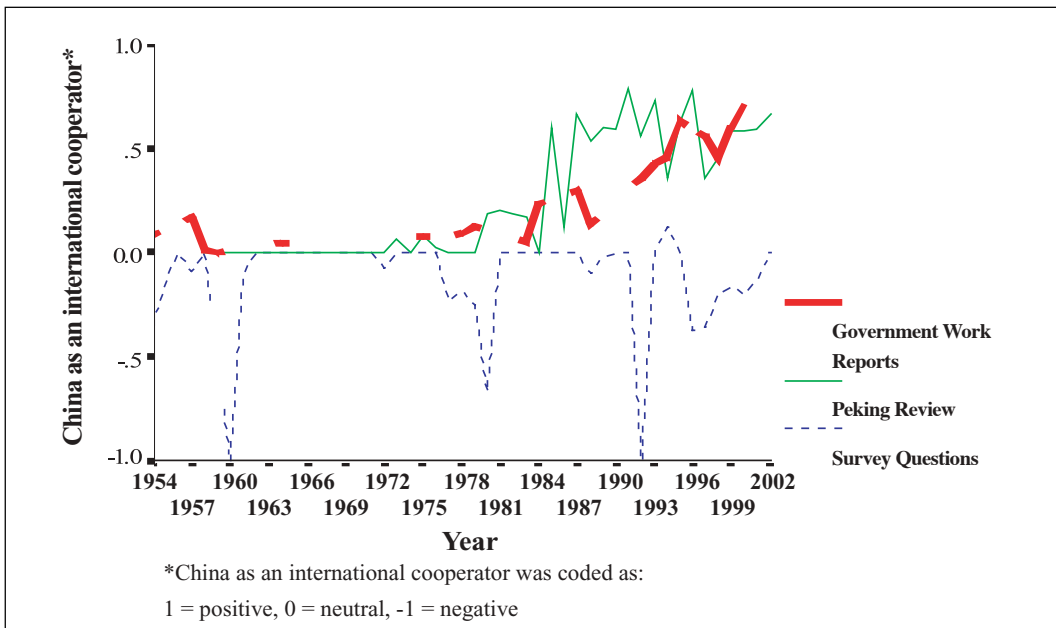
Note: See note to Figure 3.

Figure 9. Images and Perceptions (7)



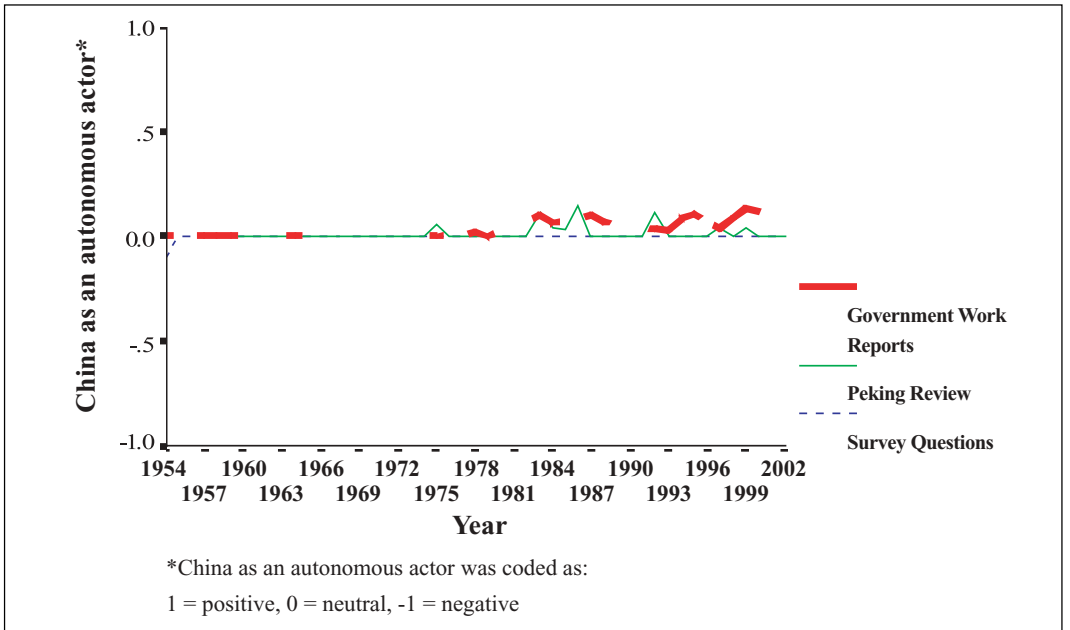
Note: See note to Figure 3.

Figure 10. Images and Perceptions (8)



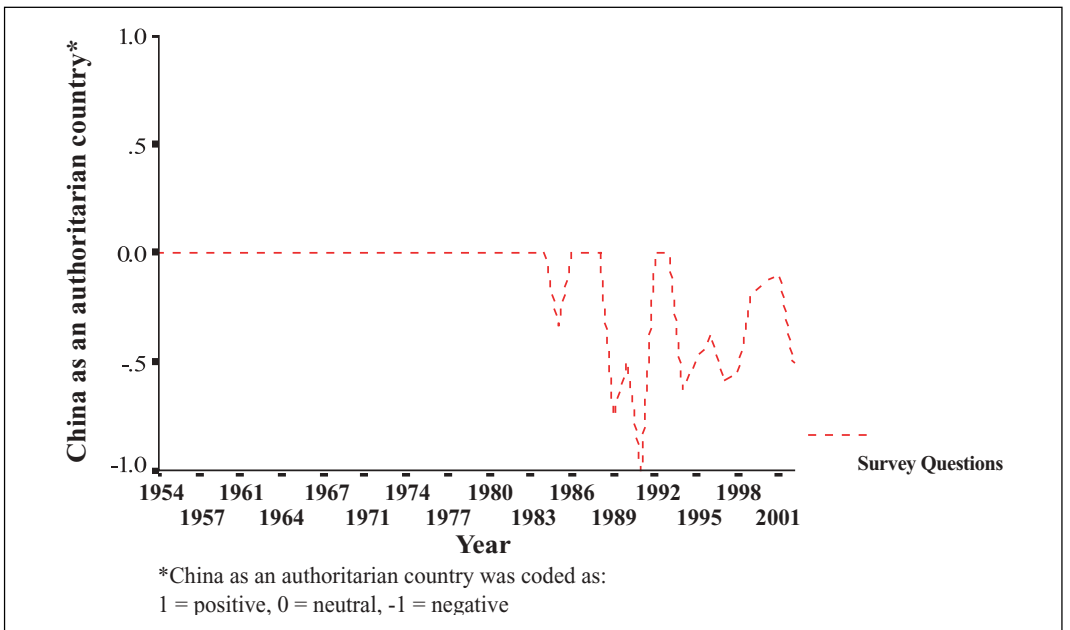
Note: See note to Figure 3.

**Figure 11. Images and Perceptions (9)**



Note: See note to Figure 3.

**Figure 12. Images and Perceptions (10)**



Note: See note to Figure 3.

an autonomous actor. But to the extent they have, their conclusion has been negative (Figure 11). Finally, the American public has by and large ignored China's self-depiction as a bastion of revolution (Figure 6), while it strongly holds an image not projected by the Chinese government, i.e., the image of China as an authoritarian state (Figure 12).

What explains these patterns? Why are American images of China sometimes similar to, but often at odds with China's projected images? Part of the answer lies in the type of image involved. Some images are about more or less objective attributes and thus leave little room for interpretation. China as a developing country and a major power both fall into this category. China's backward economy and low living standards are rather straightforward indicators of its development status. Its size, population, permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council, and possession of nuclear weapons are all clear signs of its major power status. In such cases, it is not hard for American perceptions and China's projections to converge. Other images require subjective judgments and are thus more controversial. China as a socialist country, anti-hegemonic force, peace-loving nation, victim of foreign aggression, international cooperator, bastion of revolution, and autonomous actor belong to this more subjective category.

What, then, explains when and why American perceptions converge with or diverge from China's projected images on the more subjective issues? One factor may be found in the differences between the images and Chinese behaviour. Obviously, if China substantiates its words with deeds, there is a better chance that American perceptions will agree with the images than if there is a large gap between the words and deeds. For instance, it is hard for Americans to concur with China's self-portrayal as a peace-loving nation when it uses or threatens force against its neighbours. It is no wonder that American perception of China as a warlike country intensified during the early 1960s after the Sino-Indian War; in the late 1970s and early 1980s around the time of the Sino-Vietnamese War; and in the early 1990s when China dramatically increased its military budget and engaged in some alarming weapons deals, including the purchase of fighters from the former Soviet Union, and the alleged negotiation over an aircraft carrier from Ukraine. However, even when China's behaviour is consistent with its projected images, American perception may still differ greatly from those images. For example, by most standards, it is clear that the Chinese government has become much more cooperative with the international community in the last 20 years or so. Ironically, the American perception of China has moved the other way. In the last ten years, in particular, Americans have become increasingly negative about China in this area.

To explain this phenomenon, it is helpful to turn to psychological theories of perception (and misperception). Psychologists have long noticed that people do not treat all incoming information equally. They are much more ready to accept information consistent with their existing perceptions than information that contradicts them. In fact, they even mis-interpret information contradicting familiar patterns as being

consistent with those patterns.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in policy making, “decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and images.”<sup>19</sup> Extending this perspective to inter-group perceptions, social psychologists find that people tend to use character-based attributions to explain an out-group’s undesirable behaviours and use situational attributions to explain the group’s desirable behaviours.<sup>20</sup> In international relations, this means that if a rival country acts cooperatively, it is seen as forced to do so by situation; if the rival country acts aggressively, its action is seen as dispositional.<sup>21</sup> Combining these insights, one could draw the following inferences: (1) The likelihood is high that people will accept a negative image of a rival country if the image is consistent with existing images of that country. (2) It is somewhat likely that people will accept a negative image of a rival country even if the image challenges existing images of that country. (3) It is somewhat likely that people will accept a positive image of a rival country if the image is consistent with existing images of that country. (4) The likelihood is low that people will accept a positive image of a rival country if the image contradicts existing images of that country (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** *The Psychology of Image-building*

	<b>Negative images</b>	<b>Positive images</b>
Stereotype confirming	Highly likely to be accepted	Somewhat likely to be accepted
Stereotype challenging	Somewhat likely to be accepted	Unlikely to be accepted

These inferences about perception between rivals shed light on the convergence and divergence of American perception of China and China’s projected national images. We begin with the case of convergence. The image of China as a socialist country corresponds with existing American perception since the founding of the People’s Republic. Furthermore, in the ideological context of the United States, this is a negative image. Not surprisingly, Americans easily accept this image.

<sup>18</sup> For an early discussion of this, see Jerome Bruner and Leo Postman, “On the Perceptions of Incongruity: A Paradigm,” in *Perception and Personality*, ed. Jerome Bruner and David Krech (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1950).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” *World Politics* XX, No. 3 (1968): 455.

<sup>20</sup> These findings can be found in Donald Taylor and Vaishna Jaggi, “Ethnocentrism and Causal Attribution in a South Indian Context,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 5, No. 2 (1974): 162–71; and Thomas Pettigrew, “The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport’s Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 5, No. 4 (1979): 461–76.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

The images of China as an anti-hegemonic force and victim of foreign aggression are mixed cases. The anti-hegemonic image is not particularly consistent with the traditional American view of the Middle Kingdom. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the time American perceptions of the country, have gone in the opposite direction. On the other hand, to the United States, which is a hegemonic power, an anti-hegemonic force is as much a negative image as a positive one. Thus, the American public did not always reject this image of China.

Next, we turn to the cases of divergence. The image of a peace-loving nation is a positive one that every country in the world seeks for itself. Furthermore, it contradicts the American stereotype of communist countries, including the PRC. Thus, it has been a hard-sell to the American public. The same is true of China's image as a victim, an international cooperator, and to a lesser extent, an autonomous actor. Thus, the American public has by and large rejected these images.

The image of China as a bastion of revolution has been neither accepted nor rejected but simply ignored by the American public. This is because such language is so alien to American foreign policy culture that it has failed to engage the American public altogether. Finally, the image of China as an authoritarian state is a negative image that fits well with the American stereotype of communist countries. It is thus not surprising that Americans hold this perception of China, even though it is not an image projected by the Chinese government.

What lessons can the Chinese government learn from this record? First, it is worth taking into account the variation among images along the objective/subjective spectrum. Generally speaking, national images toward the objective end are relatively clear-cut, leaving little room for the art of image building. On the other hand, national images toward the subjective end are more subject to cultivation. Second, while building images, it is important to substantiate words with deeds. Image building is more likely (though not necessarily) to produce desirable perceptions when action conforms with the projected images. Third, it is important to recognise that while it is easy to maintain an old negative image or to gain a new negative image, it is extremely difficult to build a new positive image. To put it differently, it is very easy to be branded with a bad image and very hard to break away from it. It is also very easy to do damage to national images, and very hard to repair them. Finally, projection of China's images abroad needs to take foreign cultures into consideration. If the Chinese government uses concepts or language which are alien to a targeted audience, as it has done so frequently, its image building is bound to fail.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> China's public relations czar, Zhao Qizheng, seems to understand this point very well. See an interview with Zhao in *Huasheng Yuebao*, Jul. 2000. However, China's publicity workers have changed little in that direction.



## Image Building and Behaviour

Just as the PRC government should be concerned about the convergence or divergence of others' perceptions of the country, and its own projected images of China, other countries interacting with China should be interested in the impact of China's projected images on its actual behaviour. If China's projected images have some bearing on its behaviour, then they could be seen as one indicator of the likely range of Chinese behaviour. Furthermore, if images can affect behaviour, outsiders can try to influence Chinese behaviour by influencing the kinds of national images China pursues.

I see four possible types of image-behaviour relationships. First, there may be a big gap between China's projected images and its foreign policy behaviour. In this scenario, the images and behaviour are "de-coupled" and have almost nothing to do with one another.<sup>23</sup> Second, the government may use various national images to justify its foreign policies to the domestic public and/or the international community. In this scenario, images may seem to be consistent with the behaviour, but have no causal effect on foreign policy behaviours. Instead, they are after thoughts aimed at assisting foreign policies chosen on other grounds. Third, the government may calculatingly engage in foreign policy behaviour according to its projected images so as to give credibility to the latter. Fourth, the government may unthinkingly choose its foreign policies according to its projected images because they reflect the leadership's conception of China's role in international affairs. In this scenario, projected national images have a constitutive effect on foreign policy behaviour.

We will not discuss the first two types of image-behaviour relationships because neither involves any causal effect of images on behaviours. Instead, let's focus on the third and fourth types of image-behaviour relationships, where projected images have a causal impact on foreign policy behaviours. Generally speaking, if a projected image is strategic, it can have a *constraining* effect on behaviour. If a projected image is internalised, it is likely to have a *constitutive* effect. Therefore, before looking into the image-behaviour relationships, it is helpful to distinguish strategic national images and internalised national images.

A simple and seemingly reasonable way to judge if an image is strategic or internalised is to see if it is projected consistently across time and to various audiences. Those images projected consistently are probably internalised, while those invoked variously across time or audiences are likely to be strategic and thus not

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<sup>23</sup> The "de-coupling" of images and behaviour may reflect the lack of seriousness on the part of the government about its projected images. It may also result from a lack of coordination between the government agencies in charge of image building and other agencies pursuing their own goals.

internalised. Going back to Figures 1 and 2, we can see that four national images have been projected most consistently across time and audiences — China as a peace-loving nation, victim, anti-hegemonic force, and developing country. We can conclude with some confidence that these projected images are more than strategic, that they reflect the leadership's strongly-held self-images of China.<sup>24</sup> The other images are strategic.

How do we know when strategic images have a causal impact on foreign policy behaviour? There are two methods to establish this relationship. One is to look for direct evidence that the Chinese government takes a foreign policy action because it sees the action as consistent with the strategic image it is trying to project. The other is to look for indirect evidence that a foreign policy action is not taken because of any immediate material gains and that it is consistent with a projected national image.<sup>25</sup> Direct evidence is not easy to find since Chinese policy making has been secretive for the most part. So here we have to rely primarily on indirect evidence.

First, we examine some strategic national images and their constraining effect on Chinese foreign policy. The most salient of such images during the Maoist period was that of China as a bastion of revolution. As Figure 6 shows, the Chinese government emphasised this image from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, a period when the PRC was more or less estranged from both the US and Soviet Union. During this time, the Chinese government saw the Third World as its greatest political opportunity, and believed that a revolutionary image would help increase

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<sup>24</sup> These self-images overlap but differ from what Wang Gungwu identifies as the several layers of Chinese self-perceptions — a socialist market economy, developing economy, modern nation, historic empire, civilisational challenge, and potential global power. See Wang Gungwu, "China's New Paths for National Reemergence," in *China's Political Economy*, ed. Wang Gungwu and John Wong (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1998), pp. 95–148. The absence of a socialist market economy, modern nation, historic empire, and civilisational challenge on my list of China's self-images is probably due to my narrow focus on China's images as an international actor rather than its general national images. That aside, my analysis agrees with Wang's on China's self-perception as a developing country. We differ in that my data point to China's self-images of a peace-loving nation and an anti-hegemonic force, while Wang emphasises China's self-perception as a potential global power.

<sup>25</sup> Two points are worth noting here. First, I emphasise *immediate* material gains because analytically it is hard to separate long-term material interests from image-building. Today's good image often translates into tomorrow's material gains. Second, my focus here is on cases where image-making considerations produce different behaviour than short-term material considerations. This is not to negate the many instances where these two sets of considerations go hand in hand and lead to the same behaviour. I do not deal with the latter type of cases because there it is difficult to single out the effects of image-building considerations.

China's political influence in Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>26</sup> While there is no doubt that the image of a bastion of revolution was an instrument serving China's national interest, it sometimes had a constraining impact on Chinese foreign policy. In order to boost its credentials, China spent valuable resources supporting revolutionary forces when no immediate economic, military or political interest was at stake. This was especially true during the Cultural Revolution, when the Chinese government strenuously projected China's revolutionary image. According to one scholar, during that time, "Peking committed itself to various avowedly radical groups in Africa, India, and the Persian Gulf in whose victory or defeat China had little to gain."<sup>27</sup> The absence of material payoffs in these cases constitutes indirect evidence that China's foreign policy behaviour was aimed primarily at national image building.<sup>28</sup>

A salient example can be found in China's relations with Southeast Asia. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, Mao's government provided military and political training, propaganda support as well as arms to rebellious groups in Southeast Asia. China's assistance to these revolutionary activities did not promise tangible returns. In fact, not only did this cost China resources, it also badly undermined China's relations with the governments of those countries.<sup>29</sup> China's revolutionary diplomacy thus only makes sense if it is seen as part of China's national image building efforts.

Considerations of national image building not only led to China providing military and political support to revolutionary groups, they also played a role in shaping China's foreign economic aid behaviours during the Maoist era. China under Mao was the only country in the world that regularly gave aid to other countries with higher per

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<sup>26</sup> See Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy: Peking's Support for Wars of National Liberation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 15; and Yan Xuetong, *Zhongguo guojia liyi fenxi* (An Analysis of China's National Interest), 2nd edition (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia: Peking's Relations with Revolutionary Movements* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), p. 389.

<sup>28</sup> An alternative explanation may attribute such behaviour to Marxist ideology. I find that explanation less than convincing because despite its rhetoric, the Chinese government has often departed from Marxism in both its domestic and foreign policies.

<sup>29</sup> See Melvin Gurtov, *China and Southeast Asia — The Politics of Survival; A Study of Foreign Policy Interaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Taylor and Jaggi, "Ethnocentrism"; and Edwin Martin, *Southeast Asia and China: The End of Containment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977). Similar behaviour was also present in China's foreign relations elsewhere in the world. The cost of such behaviour is made clear by the political and strategic gains after China toned down its rhetoric of world revolution. In 1970, at the height of China's radical foreign policy practices, only 53 countries had diplomatic relations with China. By early 1974, the number had grown to 90. See Gurtov, *China and Southeast Asia*, p. 180.

capita GNP than its own.<sup>30</sup> The Chinese saw their assistance to socialist countries and countries which were former colonies as part of their commitment to the struggle against colonialism and imperialism. By and large, China's aid lived up to its declared purpose — to help the recipient countries become economically independent. Not only were the financial terms generous, but the aid programmes were also designed to enable recipient countries to gradually free themselves from having to export cheap raw materials and import expensive finished products. According to one student of Chinese foreign aid, "Beijing wanted to use aid for propaganda purposes and thus sought to emphasise differences between its aid and that provided by the West."<sup>31</sup>

The most important strategic national image in the post-Mao period has been that of China as an international cooperator. As Figure 10 shows, since the mid-1980s the Chinese government has gone out of its way to portray China as eager to cooperate with other countries in the world. This image has been part of China's overall strategy to establish a friendly international environment for its modernisation project. It, too, has had a constraining impact on Chinese foreign policy behaviour under some conditions. An important case in point is China's signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996. This was a dramatic departure from the previous Chinese position. For years the Chinese government had called for the US and Soviet Union/Russia to substantially cut down their nuclear weapons before China would limit its own development of nuclear weapons. This is understandable given the small size of China's nuclear arsenal and its importance as a symbol of China's great power status and ultimate guarantor of China's national security. Since the CTBT puts a number of explicit restrictions on China's nuclear development plan, from a Chinese point of view, the treaty would freeze China's inferior position *vis-à-vis* Russia and the US and thus seriously undermine its national security and national power. What, then, made the Chinese government change its policy and accept the CTBT? According to informed scholars, the government's concern for China's international image was a major factor.<sup>32</sup> After the CTBT moved onto the arms control agenda in 1993, China was compelled to negotiate despite deep reservations

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<sup>30</sup> This is pointed out in Lin Teh-chang, "Beijing's Foreign Aid Policy in the 1990s: Continuity and Change," *Issues and Studies* 32, No. 1 (1996): 32–56; and Ping Ai, "From Proletarian Internationalism to Mutual Development: China's Cooperation with Tanzania, 1965–1995," in *Agencies in Foreign Aid: Comparing China, Sweden and the United States in Tanzania*, ed. Goran Hyden and Rwekaza Mukandala (New York: St. Martin, 1999), pp. 156–201.

<sup>31</sup> Lin, "Beijing's Foreign Aid Policy", p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> See Alastir Iain Johnston, "Prospects for Chinese Nuclear Force Modernization: Limited Deterrence Versus Multilateral Arms Control," *The China Quarterly* (1996): 548–76; and Bates Gill and Evan Medeiros, "Foreign and Domestic Influences in China's Arms Control and Nonproliferation Policies," *The China Quarterly* (2000): 66–94.

because not doing so would contradict decades of Chinese rhetoric of disarmament and badly damage the country's image. The Chinese government does not deny its concern over international public opinion. In a statement about China's decision to sign the treaty, the Chinese government noted that it was in part "a response to the appeal of the vast number of non-nuclear-weapon states."<sup>33</sup>

Another case is China's foreign exchange policy in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997. In July that year, the currencies of a number of Asian economies collapsed due to international speculation and domestic corruption. As the crisis spread from one country to the next, the world turned its attention to China, to see if it would devalue the *renminbi* (RMB). China had good economic and political reasons to do so. The depreciation of regional currencies threatened to undermine Chinese exports and the inflow of FDI — the twin engines of economic growth in China. This, in turn, would further undermine the country's political stability, which was already fragile because of increasing layoffs in the cities and the deterioration of rural living standards. However, despite these considerations, the Chinese government decided not to resort to a yuan devaluation. Instead, it promised the world that it would uphold the value of its currency because it was the right thing to do for a "responsible great power" (*fuzeren de daguo*). For the next couple of years, Chinese leaders repeatedly emphasised that its exchange policy represented its willingness and ability to contribute to the well-being of the international community.<sup>34</sup> Chinese policy analysts explicitly linked China's exchange-rate policy to its desire to improve China's image on the international stage.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Gill and Medeiros, "Foreign and Domestic Influences", p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Wang Hongying, "Crisis and Credibility: China's Exchange Rate Policy in the Aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis," in *Monetary Order: Ambiguous Economics, Ubiquitous Politics*, ed. Jonathan Kirshner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 153–71.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Liu Jinhua, "Zhongguo guoji zhanlue: xiangguan lilun yu xianshi sikao" (China's International Strategy: Relevant Theories and Reflections), *Guoji jingji pinglun* (literally, Comments on International Economy) 3–4 (1999): 57–60; Shi Yinhong, "Guanyu Zhongguo de daguo diwei jiqi xingxiang sikao" (Thoughts on China's Great Power Status and Its Image), *Guoji jingji pinglun* (Sep.–Oct. 1999): 43–4; and Shen Jianing, "APEC Shanghai huiyi yu Zhongguo de guoji xingxiang" (APEC Meeting in Shanghai and China's International Image), *Guoji zhengzhi yanjiu* (literally, Study of International Politics) No. 1 (2002): 115–8. In an argument parallel to the one made here, Rosemary Foot contends that because the Chinese government cares about its international image (though she does not discuss what kind of an image), it is capable of being shamed for violating international human rights standards. China's image consciousness has been a major factor underlying its incremental concessions to the international human rights regime. See Rosemary Foot, *Rights Beyond Borders: The Global Community and the Struggle over Human Rights in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The constraining effect of images is quite consistent with the neo-liberal institutionalist approach to international relations. This approach stresses the importance of reputation in the conduct of foreign relations. In the words of Robert Keohane, “to a government that values its ability to make future agreements, reputation is a crucial resource; and the most important aspect of an actor’s reputation in world politics is the belief of others that it will keep its future commitments even when a particular situation, myopically viewed, makes it appear disadvantageous to do so.”<sup>36</sup> Sometimes, achieving a credible reputation with rivals as well as allies requires behaviour that may not be in the immediate interests of a state. If policy makers regard reputation as sufficiently important, they will engage in behaviour that they otherwise would avoid. For example, in order to demonstrate resolve in its confrontation with the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, the US became involved in the Vietnam War, which generated enormous political, economic and military losses with no obvious material returns.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Scandinavian countries and the EU devote considerable economic resources to aid poor countries, which do not necessarily result in immediate financial or strategic gains, but establish and reinforce their altruistic images.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, since World War II, Japan has significantly limited its military capabilities in order to ameliorate its militarist reputation and establish a trustworthy image among its Asian neighbours.<sup>39</sup>

While strategic national images can constrain foreign policy behaviour, internalised national images often have a constitutive effect on the latter. As discussed above, internalised images include China as a peace-loving nation, victim of foreign aggression, anti-hegemonic force, and developing country.<sup>40</sup> We examine each image in turn.

Let’s begin with the image of China as a peace-loving nation and victim. Figures 3 and 4 show that the Chinese government has pursued these images with remarkable

<sup>36</sup> Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 116.

<sup>37</sup> For such a perspective of American involvement in Vietnam, see Stephen Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investment and US Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>38</sup> O. Stokke, “Development Assistance: Prospects and Priorities,” *Development Dialogue* 2 (1995): 21–33; and Christian Freres, “The European Union as a Global ‘Civilian Power’: Development Cooperation in EU-Latin American Relations,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 62, No. 2 (2000): 63–85.

<sup>39</sup> This argument is made in Paul Midford, “The Logic of Reassurance and Japan’s Grand Strategy,” *Security Studies* 11, No. 3 (2002): 1–44.

<sup>40</sup> I make no claim that these internalised images are uniquely Chinese. For instance, many countries probably see themselves as peace-loving nations.

consistency. On the surface, these images seem to be at odds with China's foreign policy conduct. In fact, the PRC has been more prone to use force against others than other major powers. According to the *Correlates of War Project*, between 1950 and 1992, there were 22 inter-state wars.<sup>41</sup> China was party to four of these wars, more than any other country except Israel (see Table 3). But a careful look yields a different conclusion. Although the image/self-image of China as a peace-loving nation and victim has not led the Chinese government to a particularly peaceful and humble approach to foreign relations, it has significantly shaped the way Chinese policy makers perceive and define international problems. Given its firm belief that China is a peace-loving nation and victim, in situations of conflict, through the mechanism of cognitive balance, the Chinese government invariably sees the other side as the aggressor. Once the situation is defined as foreign aggression against China, the Chinese government often feels compelled to take resolute action. One can see this pattern in numerous cases, from the Korean War to the Sino-Vietnamese war, and from the multiple Taiwan Strait crises to the disputes in the South China Sea. In each situation, the internalised image of China as a peace-loving nation and victim ultimately led to self-righteousness and intransigence on the part of China's foreign policy.<sup>42</sup>

What about the image of China as an anti-hegemonic force? Figure 7 shows it has been a constant theme in Chinese national image building. The constitutive effect of this image can be seen in Chinese position *vis-à-vis* international conflicts involving asymmetric powers. For instance, as noted above, the *Correlates of War Project* records 22 inter-state wars between 1950 and 1992. Of the 18 that did not involve China, the Chinese government expressed support for, or sympathy with, the weaker party in ten cases or 56% of the time, and sided with the stronger party in only one case or 5% of the time (see Table 3). Further research is likely to show similar patterns of Chinese behaviour regarding other types of asymmetrical international conflicts, including incidents of international tension short of war, economic quarrels, and political arguments.

Furthermore, the internalised image of China as an anti-hegemonic agent, like the images of China as a peace-loving nation and victim, colours the way Chinese leaders

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<sup>41</sup> J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *Correlates of War Project: International and Civil War Data, 1816-1992*, ICPSR 9905 (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1994). The *Correlates of War Project* is maintained by the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research in Ann Arbor Michigan. Its data are widely used in studies of war.

<sup>42</sup> In a parallel argument, Andrew Scobell points out that the Chinese elite holds three core beliefs dearly — that the Chinese (1) are a peace-loving people, (2) are not aggressive or expansionist, and (3) only use force in self-defence. These beliefs, however, do not constrain China's use of military force. See Andrew Scobell, "The Chinese Cult of Defense," *Issues and Studies* 37, No. 5 (2001): 100-27.

perceive China's interactions with other countries. It makes it possible and likely for the Chinese government to reject, in a knee-jerk reaction, any characterisation of China ever threatening anyone else. When others find China overbearing, Chinese policy makers are bound to view this reaction as a misunderstanding or, worse, deliberate distortion. For instance, when China went to war with Vietnam in 1979, China was obviously the

**Table 3:** *Inter-state Wars 1950–92*

		<b>Wars involving China</b>	<b>Wars where China sympathised with weaker party</b>	<b>Wars where China sympathised with stronger party</b>
1	Korean (1950–53)	✓		
2	Russo-Hungarian (1956)			✓
3	Sinai (1956)		✓	
4	Sino-Indian (1962)	✓		
5	Vietnam (1965–75)		✓	
6	Second Kashmir (1965)		✓	
7	Six Day (1967)		✓	
8	Israel Egyptian (1969–70)		✓	
9	Football (1969)			
10	Bangladesh (1971)			
11	Yom Kippur (1973)		✓	
12	Turco-Cypriot (1974)			
13	Vietnam-Cambodian (1975–79)		✓	
14	Ethiopian-Somalian (1977–78)		✓	
15	Uganda-Tanzanian (1978–79)			
16	Sino-Vietnamese (1979)	✓		
17	Iran-Iraq (1980–88)			
18	Falkland Islands (1982)		✓	
19	Israel-Syria (1982)		✓	
20	Sino-Vietnamese (1985–87)	✓		
21	Gulf (1990–91)			
22	Azeri-Armenian (1992)			

*Source:* J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *Correlates of War Project: International and Civil War Data, 1816–1992*, ICPSR 9905 (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1994).



stronger party. But given China's self-image, it was not possible for the Chinese government to see its own behaviour as hegemonic. Instead, it believed that Vietnam had acted hegemonically in Indochina. China was simply teaching the Vietnamese a lesson.

Finally, we turn to the image of China as a developing country. Figure 8 shows this to be another image the Chinese government has projected steadfastly. The constitutive effect of this self-image can be seen in China's interactions with the developed countries in the world. During the early years of the People's Republic, the Chinese government was a junior ally of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Mao could not tolerate Soviet domination of China. On the other hand, having defined itself as a developing country, the Chinese government was perfectly comfortable being a recipient of Soviet economic and military aid. In fact, Chinese policy makers took such aid for granted. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Soviet Union reduced and then withheld aid despite China's repeated requests for assistance, the Chinese were bitterly disappointed. This issue played an important part in the break-up of the Sino-Soviet alliance.<sup>43</sup>

The internalised image of China as a developing country has also had a constitutive effect on its relations with Western industrialised countries. For example, for years China has been one of the largest recipients of Japanese foreign aid. Recently, the Japanese public expressed reluctance to continue the same level of assistance to China. In addition to Japan's own fiscal problems, the Japanese were also concerned about China's growing military and economic strengths. In 2000, a Japanese foreign ministry panel suggested reducing Japan's aid to China. Chinese officials dismiss the view that China is becoming powerful and thus should do what it can for itself. They make clear that China is still poor and still needs Japanese assistance. In fact, they define Japanese financial assistance as an important part of the bilateral relationship, implying aid reduction would undermine Sino-Japanese relations. China's internalised image of a developing country has similarly shaped its reaction to other industrialised nations as well as to international human rights, environmental, and trade regimes.

These four national images — a peace-loving nation, victim of foreign aggression, anti-hegemonic force and developing country — reflect China's self-conception in international affairs. They are as much assertions of China's identity as they are public relations scripts for foreign consumption. The impact of these images on Chinese foreign policy behaviour is consistent with the contention of the constructivist perspective of international relations. This perspective emphasises the constructed nature of national interest, among other things, arguing that the means and ends of a country's foreign

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<sup>43</sup> This is made clear by Shuguang Zhang, *Economic Cold War: America's Embargo Against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

policy are shaped by its identity. For example, American foreign policy in the early years, Soviet foreign policy at the end of the Cold War, and Japanese and German foreign policy since the end of World War II are all “abnormal” from a structural-realist point of view, but can be better understood in light of national self-images.<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting that over time, even a strategic image can become a self-image and thus have a *constitutive* effect on their behaviour. As psychologists demonstrate in their study of individuals, various considerations can lead people to take actions that are inconsistent with or directly contradictory to their beliefs. But once they engage in these actions, a number of psychological mechanisms — self-attribution, self-persuasion, and dissonance reduction — may intervene and remould their beliefs.<sup>45</sup> In other words, if people consistently abide by a norm, although they may not believe in it at the beginning, over time the norm may become internalised. Assuming the same process takes place among national leaders, it seems quite possible that as they seek to establish a certain kind of image by engaging in behaviour consistent with that image, that image may in time become an internalised self-image. In that case, it is likely to have a constitutive effect on future foreign policy behaviour.

To summarise, projected national images can have a causal impact on foreign policy behaviour. Thus, it would be a mistake simply to dismiss China’s projected images as being pure deception and having nothing to do with Chinese foreign policy behaviour. Instead, they provide useful clues. Sometimes, they can help predict the range of behaviour on the part of China. Sometimes they can help others understand how China interprets international situations. With these clues one can gain a more nuanced picture of Chinese foreign policy behaviour than that portrayed by a simple structural theory, such as neo-realism. Furthermore, the findings here suggest that outsiders can influence Chinese behaviour by influencing the kinds of images China pursues. Once the Chinese

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<sup>44</sup> See Mlada Bukovansky, “American Identity and Neutral Rights from Independence to the War of 1912,” *International Organization* 55, No. 3 (1997): 553–88; Peter Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Robert Herman, “Identity, Norms, and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identities in World Politics*, ed. Peter Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 271–316; and Thomas Berger, “Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan,” in *The Culture of National Security*, ed. Katzenstein, pp. 317–56. Another theoretical perspective that emphasises the constitutive impact of internalised national images can be found in the foreign policy literature on “national role conception.” See Stephen Walker, ed., *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

<sup>45</sup> For an elaboration, see Philip G. Zimbardo and Michael R. Leippe, *The Psychology of Attitude Change and Social Influence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 87–125.

government decides to build a certain type of image, that image can have a constraining effect on China's policy choices. There is evidence that during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the social rewards the international community bestowed on China played an important role in encouraging the Chinese government to pursue an image of a "responsible great power." This in turn led China to adhere to a cooperative policy of no-devaluation. Moreover, if over time this image becomes internalised, it may even have a constitutive effect on Chinese behaviour.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have taken a modest step toward understanding China's national image building as part of Chinese foreign policy. I have reported findings about the types of images the Chinese government has sought to project, the discrepancies between China's projected images and others' perceptions of China, and the impact of projected images on Chinese foreign policy behaviour. Much more remains to be done. First, as noted above, in comparing China's projected images and others' perceptions of China, I have only examined the public opinion in the US, which may not have been the main intended audience until the last 20 to 30 years. In the future, it will be useful to study the perceptions of China on the part of European and Third World countries. Second, as I also noted above, in exploring the possible impact of China's image building on its foreign policy behaviours, I have primarily used indirect evidence. Detailed case studies are necessary to find direct evidence of the role of image considerations in foreign policy making, including how such considerations interact with other factors. Finally, this paper does not deal with the sources of China's projected images and their evolution. I have provided some preliminary answers to this question elsewhere,<sup>46</sup> but it is an area that certainly deserves further research.

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<sup>46</sup> See Wang Hongying, "National Image Building: A Case Study of China" (paper presented at the International Studies Association Meeting, Hong Kong, Jul. 2001).

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