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CHINA'S IMAGES IN THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS, 1973-2020

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Abstract: This paper discusses how China was represented in the State of The Union Address between 1973 and 2020. The hypothesis is that China's image has undergone qualitative changes and that shifting the party in the White House is not a sufficient condition to transform this representation. It is employed the content analysis to map the frequency of the word 'China' and to analyze the discursive context of its apparition. The mentions are evaluated according to three variables: axiology (positive, negative, or mixed), discursive focus (direct or indirect), and frequency of mentions. Four discursive paradigms, or periods in which the image was qualitatively stable, are identified and discussed. The analysis showed that external shocks have an important impact on changing China's image and that these representations usually signalize actual priorities of US foreign policy.

Keywords: Presidential rhetoric; US policy towards China; Content Analysis.

AS IMAGENS DA CHINA NO *STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS*, 1973-2020

Resumo: Neste artigo, é discutido como a China foi representada nos discursos do *State of The Union Address* entre 1973 e 2020. A hipótese é que a imagem da China sofreu mudanças qualitativas e que a troca de partido na Casa Branca não é condição suficiente para transformar essa representação. O estudo emprega a análise de conteúdo para mapear a frequência da palavra 'China' e analisar o contexto discursivo de sua aparição. As menções são avaliadas por meio de três variáveis: axiologia (negativa, positiva ou mista); foco discursivo (direto ou indireto) e frequência das menções. Foram identificados e discutidos quatro paradigmas discursivos, ou períodos em que a imagem foi qualitativamente estável. A análise evidenciou que choques externos tem impacto importante na mudança da imagem da China e que as representações da China costumam sinalizar prioridades reais da política externa dos Estados Unidos.

Palavras-chaves: Retórica presidencial; Política dos Estados Unidos para a China; Análise de Conteúdo.

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I. Introduction

The *State of the Union Address* (SOTU) is a constitutional obligation and one of the major events in the United States official calendar. There, US Presidents proclaims to Congress the national situation and announces proposals for the legislative year (SHOGAN, 2015, p. 1). By tradition, the SOTU is delivered at the beginning of Congress' annual activities, and it has been broadcast to the entire country by radio and television since the 1940s (PETERS; WOOLLEY, 2019). So, the public was widened through the 20th century, and the speech is now thought and addressed to both Congress and the American public (SHOGAN, 2015, p. 15).³

Because of the high public attention, the SOTU is an extraordinary opportunity for Presidents. In this speech, they articulate reasons to achieve support for their political agenda or to disseminate novel ideas. According to Shogan (2015, p. 15), the SOTU is “an important weapon in the President's arsenal as a legislative leader”.

Despite its importance, the study of foreign policy in the SOTU is contested due to elections every two years. So, when a topic is presented it is not clear whether this is a genuine interest or an instrumentalization to achieve a legislative proposal or electoral support. However, if the Executive wants to establish new policies or durable ones, it needs support from both Congress and public opinion. As Krasner (1977) showed, the political system of the United States is weak and domestic opposition can create huge constrains to foreign policy. Furthermore, Sutter (2010, p. 100) argued that US foreign policy permeability to domestic forces is more outstanding after the Cold War. Hence, social forces dispute the policy orientation, and policies that need to extract resources from society or create concentrated costs against social groups need to be legitimized to allow the durability of the action course and to protect the political capital of the President and his party. In this sense, Kaufmann (2004) showed that G.W. Bush, in his intention to achieve public support for preventive war against Iraq, used the SOTUs to inflate Iraq's threat.

Therefore, this speech is of much interest in foreign policy analysis, above all due to constancy allowing historical comparison. Indeed, the presidential guidance can signalize the Executive's actual interests. As Kaufmann (2004) pointed out: “The White House enjoys great authority in foreign policy debate”. In this sense, Shogan (2015, p. 11) stated that: “[...] the

³ For Shogan (2015, p. 15): “Presidents must receive the support of a majority in the House, and oftentimes a supermajority in the Senate, to enact their legislative proposals. Presidents have realized that the American people can help accomplish this frequently difficult task. By appealing directly to the public, a President can use popular leverage to convince Congress to adopt his policy agenda.”

President can use the State of the Union address more successfully to reshape and reconstitute public opinion about foreign policy.”

This article analyzes the SOTUs from 1973 to present, or from the afterward of Nixon’s travel to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) until Trump’s 2020 SOTU.⁴ The major aim is to study the speeches in themselves to identify whether and when qualitatively changes occurred. In this sense, some comments regarding the historical context are made for better assessment of the speeches, although the long period analyzed does not allow a deep presentation of this context.

The hypothesis is that China’s image has undergone qualitative changes and that shifting the party in the White House is not a sufficient condition to transform this representation. It is employed the content analysis to map the frequency of the word ‘China’ and to analyze the discursive context of its apparition. The mentions are evaluated according to three variables: axiology, focus, and frequency of mentions. Axiology evaluation, the main one, is the analyzes of the association of China’s mentions to words: positive, negative, or mixed. Next, it is observed the discursive focus to identify whether China is the discussion topic. Last, the frequency of mentions is counted. The article proposes that the period of analysis could be divided into four discourse paradigms or *periods in which the image was qualitatively stable*.⁵

The remainder of the article is organized into six sections. The next five are based in a chronological structure. Successively, it is discussed how the President constructed China’s image in the periods: 1973 to 1989, 1990 to 1992, 1994 to 2000, 2002 to 2008, and 2009 to 2020. The concluding section discusses the main findings of the analysis and shows the frequency of mentions to China in this period.

II. The promising relationship: the sporadic legitimation of good relations, 1973-1989

The presidency of Richard Nixon (1969-1974) is a turning point for US-China relations. Until Nixon, these relations were characterized by mutual hostility and enmities patterns, especially after the military clash between the two countries in the Korea War (1950-1953). With Vietnam War damage on US leadership and domestic stability, Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his National Security Advisor, made a rapprochement movement towards Beijing (SUTTER, 2010). After Nixon’s trip, in February 1972, the relationship, with ups and downs,

⁴ For Peters and Woolley (2019), the initial message to Congress could be used as a SOTU for research purposes, even though they are not technically a SOTU. In this article, this message is treated as a SOTU.

⁵ The paradigms, as will be shown, are a usual representation, not a monolithic reference.

improved culminating with a strategic partnership against the Soviet Union in the 1980s (MANN, 2000; FOOT, 1995; COHEN, 2019).

Analyzing the SOTUs between 1973-1989, the reference to China was only in positive terms, despite fewer mentions. Two years after his travel to China, Nixon stated: "With the People's Republic of China after a generation of hostile isolation, we have begun a period of peaceful exchange and expanding trade." (NIXON, 1974). In August 1974, Nixon resigned with the Watergate scandal, and Gerald Ford becomes the new President. The only mention Ford made in the SOTUs regarding China was in 1976. With domestic difficulties in both countries, Ford celebrated the relationship and emphasize the grandiosity of China: "We have an improving relationship with China, the world's most populous nation." (FORD, 1976).

At the end of 1976, the Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated Ford in the presidential election. This created the first change of party in the Executive since the rapprochement and the expectation of a new China policy due to Carter's concerns about human rights (KISSINGER, 2011). Despite Chinese violation of human rights (MANN, 2000), he does not criticize China in the SOTUs, and the positive discourse remained. In 1979, the US recognize PRC as the government of China and denounced the defense treaty with Taipei. This year, Carter cited hope and grandiosity when he referred to China in the SOTU: "We are entering a hopeful era in our relations with one-fourth of the world's people who live in China." (CARTER, 1979). In 1980, he argues that: "Our decision to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China will help to preserve peace and stability in Asia and in the Western Pacific." (CARTER, 1980).

Ronald Reagan, a passionate anti-communist, won the 1980 election against Carter, creating new expectations of conflicts against PRC (MANN, 2000). In the election, Reagan criticized Carter's policy towards Taiwan, arguing that the US has abandoned the island with the terminus of the defense treaty (SUTTER, 2010, KISSINGER, 2011). Despite some frictions, associated mainly with US sales of weapons to Taipei, the US and China increased defense cooperation and merged a strategic partnership against the Soviet Union (YUAN, 1995, MANN, 2000, FOOT, 1995). In this context, the Reaganian crusade against communism silenced about China and it is mentioned only once in Reagan's SOTUs, a positive note in 1985: "Many countries in east Asia and the Pacific have few resources other than the enterprise of

their own people. But through low tax rates and free markets they've soared ahead of centralized economies. And now China is opening up its economy to meet its needs.” (REAGAN, 1985).⁶

In 1988, George H. Bush, Reagan's vice-president, was elected President of the United States. In the elections, Bush proposed the continuity of China policy and, in power, realized the softest transition of power in China policy since the Nixon rapprochement (MANN, 2000; SUTTER, 2010). In this vein, the first Address to Congress on February 9, 1989, the words about China are about the impressiveness of changes: “When I served as our representative in China 14 or 15 years ago, few would have predicted the scope of the changes we've witnessed since then.” (BUSH, 1989). Notwithstanding, that was the only mention of China in Bush's SOTUs. Few months after the speech occurred Tiananmen repression and the Cold War started to crumble.

In sum, the data of the period from 1973 until 1989 shows that China was represented only with positive terms, like ‘opening’, ‘peace’, ‘grandiosity’, or ‘stability’. Throughout these years, no one president associated China with communism or highlight human rights concerns in the SOTUs. The strategic partnership identified by literature (See MANN, 2000, FOOT, 1995, MEIJER, 2015) was translated in the SOTUs with praise references. Also, when China was mentioned the discussion was usually direct, and the frequency of mentions was low, only nine mentions in sixteen years.

III. The silence of Janus: Bush in the shadow of Tiananmen, 1990-1992

The year 1989 is very important for the relationship between the US and China (MANN, 2000; DUMBAUGH, 2000). The Tiananmen repression in June of this year broke down China's international image, erasing the previous idea that it was liberalizing and becoming a “normal country”. Many leaders started to see China as a repressive state. In this sense, James Mann (1999) argued that Tiananmen was a turning point for the American public and it changed China's image from “going capitalist” to “repressive China”.⁷

President Bush established sanctions against China for Tiananmen repression but protected China's “Most-Favored-Nation” (MFN) status. Few weeks after the episode, he

⁶ The words of Reagan's administration are even more positive in the National Security Strategy of 1987, and they affirmed that the US appreciates the diversity of the regimes (WHITE HOUSE, 1987).

⁷ Mann (1999, p. 102) identified that: “[...] stories in the American media tend to be governed at any given time by a single story, image or concept. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the “frame” was of China as little blue ants or automatons. In the 1970s, following the Nixon administration's opening, the frame was of the virtuous (entertaining, cute) Chinese, displaying their timeless qualities even under communism. In the 1980s, the frame was that China was ‘going capitalist.’ And for most of the 1990s, the frame was of a repressive China.”

decided that the US cannot alienate China and send a secret high-level mission to China, two times, to negotiate with the Chinese leadership. With Cold War unconcluded, the President feared the alienation of China would benefit the Soviet Union. But Congress, with both houses controlled by Democrats, discovers the trips and the pressure against Bush China's policy skyrocketed (SUTTER, 2010, MANN, 2000).⁸

As a target for critics and with indecision about what should be US policy for China after that critical juncture, the President silenced about China in the remaining SOTUs. Probably, the President was waiting to see whether a new paradigm was needed or if it was necessary to sustain the old one. As a Janus government between two ages, the choice was to wait and silence.

IV. Clinton's bridge: undermining repression with normal relations, 1994-2000

The election of Democrat William Clinton associated with the Cold War utter conclusion generated a new pattern. A few after arriving in the White House, Clinton started a fresh discursive approach towards China. He renewed the MFN in 1993 but created a condition for the next renewals: the improvement of human rights in China.⁹ However, after China knew that the administration was divided on the issue, the Chinese government chose to see if Clinton's words were genuine. With enormous pressure from the business community, Clinton abandoned the condition in 1994 and renew the MFN despite few changes in Chinese behavior regarding human rights. (MANN, 2000)

After this friction, Clinton usually represented China as a repressive country, but one that could be freer if the United States maintained normal relations, above all in trade and diplomatic terms. The defense of what is called "engagement policy" was the basis of China's image in the SOTUs of Clinton years. After the failure, Clinton portrayed China as a repressive country that should not be isolated, because the best prospect for freedom in China was to integrate Beijing in the liberal order. Therefore, China was presented in a new frame, being at the same time highlight the dark side of China and the potentiality for good. In 1994, he made the only mention to China in his first mandate. Clinton stated the importance of good relations with China and argued that PRC should change his human rights policies: "And as we build a more constructive relationship with China, we must continue to insist on clear signs of improvement in that nation's human rights record." (CLINTON, 1994).

⁸ In the elections of 1992, William Clinton accused Bush's administration of "protect tyrants".

⁹ The condition was a plea made by Clinton in the presidential campaign.

In the second mandate, Clinton frequently mentioned China in the SOTUs. The domestic context was tougher after the Third Taiwan Crisis in 1996, and Republicans and Neoconservatives were pressuring for hard measures against China. Also, it remained the pressure from human rights groups and syndicates to cut MFN status to China. In this context, Clinton supported business interest and stated in 1997 SOTU that: “We must pursue a deeper dialog with China for the sake of our interests and our ideals. An isolated China is not good for America; a China playing its proper role in the world is.” (CLINTON, 1997) In the same speech he concludes: “[...] engaging China is the best way to work on our common challenges like ending nuclear testing and to deal frankly with our fundamental differences like human rights (*Ibid*).

This speech is symbolic. It was announced one year after the military tensions between the US and China in Taiwan Strait. Against powerful groups, Clinton legitimated normal relations with China, therefore realizing the opposite movement that G.W. Bush made in the 2000s against Iraq.¹⁰ Despite China’s missile diplomacy, Clinton made a “threat deflation” to sustain the MFN and diplomatic relations with Beijing. For the disgust of Republicans, Clinton does not create China as a threat to the domestic public.

In 1999 and 2000, when Clinton was a lame-duck president, the mentions rise in the context of the US-China negotiation for the Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 1999, the president supported normal trade relations with China, taking a position in a hard debate in US society.¹¹ Clinton stated that for the advance of human rights in China it was important a normal relationship with Beijing. In 1999 SOTU, Clinton criticized China’s behavior: “In China, last year, I said to the leaders and the people what I’d like to say again tonight: Stability can no longer be bought at the expense of liberty.” (CLINTON, 1999) Nevertheless, he continued: “But I’d also like to say again to the American people: It’s important not to isolate China. The more we bring China into the world, the more the world will bring change and freedom to China.” (*Ibid*.). In the last year, Clinton restated the defense of the institute of permanent normal trade relations with China, a bill which erased the annual debate about renewing MFN to China.

¹⁰ For Kaufmann (2004), G.W. Bush made a “threat inflation” to legitimize the 2003 Iraq war.

¹¹ In the 1990s, there was no domestic consensus about the extension of MFN to China. In the political right, religious organizations and conservatives’ republicans joining hands with, in the political left, progressive democrats, syndicalists, and human rights groups, to criticize MFN extension. On the other side, centrists, business leaders, and free traders supported the extension (See DUMBAUGH, 2000). Clinton’s intervention, therefore, was necessary, and House of Representatives passed PNTR with the voting of 237 in favor and 197 votes against the bill. The Republican party was the one that most supported the PNTR. Voting data available at <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2000/roll228.xml>, access: 09/16/2019.

[...] I believe Congress should support the agreement we negotiated to bring China into the WTO, by passing permanent normal trade relations with China as soon as possible this year. [...] Our markets are already open to China; this agreement will open China's markets to us. And second, it will plainly advance the cause of peace in Asia and promote the cause of change in China. No, we don't know where it's going. All we can do is decide what we're going to do. But when all is said and done, we need to know we did everything we possibly could to maximize the chance that China will choose the right future. (CLINTON, 2000).

In Clinton's speeches, therefore, China could be open and free, and the maintenance of normal relations probably will support freedom. He stated that normal trade relations are not an end, but a device to freedom and democracy, an argument near to Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis about the inevitability of liberal democracy. The President does not silence over the negative side of the Chinese regime but maintained the need for good relations due to business interest in the Chinese market. Like George H. Bush, Clinton opposed the isolation of China and used his political capital in defense of normal relations. Therefore, China's image was more mixed in Clinton's administration. He highlighted both the human rights problems and the potential for good relations and freedom. Last, China was usually discussed direct and the frequency of mentions was high, twenty-two times in six years.

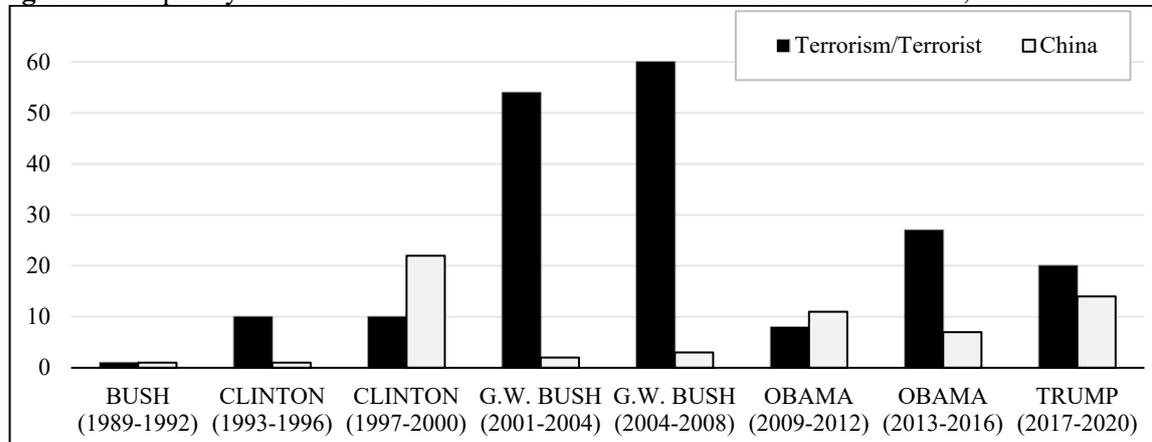
V. The Sino-American quiet cooperation, 2002-2008

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 empowered a group with a more negative view regarding China. In the campaign, G.W. Bush supported Chinese entry into the WTO but stated that China was not a strategic partnership of the United States, as suggested by Bill Clinton in 1998. (SUTTER, 2010; PECEQUILO, 2011) For the Republican candidate, China was not an enemy, but neither a partner: "China is a competitor, to be faced without ill will and without illusions." (BUSH, 2000). In the first months of the new administration, US-China relations were hardening with a diplomatic crisis regarding the Hainan Island incident and arms sales to Taiwan. (PECEQUILO, 2011) Nevertheless, the 11th of September changed the strategic focus of the United States (MASTANDUNO, 2009; KISSINGER, 2011) and the White House started to see and represent China as a partner in the Global War against Terror or in dealing with the North Korea nuclear program.¹² Terrorism was constructed as the main threat to the United

¹² For some, the strategic reorientation away from China involved a decade, for others, it was a question of two or three years. (See ROCHA, 2020, p. 254-259).

States (See LEITE, 2013) and dominated Bush's SOTUs, marginalizing other topics like China. As shown the Figure 1, China does not have centrality in Bush's SOTUs.

Figure 1. Frequency of the terms “China” and “Terrorism/Terrorist” in the SOTU, 1989-2019



Source: data from SOTUs. Authors' elaboration.

China was mentioned five times in the SOTUs of G.W. Bush's years. Few months after the terrorist attack, he stated: "In this moment of opportunity, a common danger is erasing old rivalries. America is working with Russia and China and India, in ways we have never before, to achieve peace and prosperity." (BUSH, 2002). In 2003, the President affirmed: "America is working with the countries of the region -- South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia -- to find a peaceful solution and to show the North Korean government that nuclear weapons will bring only isolation [...]." (BUSH, 2003). In 2006, he made the only negative association when associated economic competition with China and India, arguing that this challenge cannot be addressed by protectionist measures, that are poor policies.¹³ Next year, G.W. Bush returned to the pattern and pointed out: "Together with our partners in China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, we're pursuing intensive diplomacy to achieve a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons." (BUSH, 2007). Finally, in 2008, the president supported the creation of a clean energy fund to help developing countries like India and China. Therefore, G.W. Bush made few comments about China and usually associates it with cooperation against the North Korea nuclear program.

Hence, despite G.W. Bush's electoral campaign, China is not represented in the SOTUs as a threat. It usually appeared as a partner to deal with North Korea's nuclear program – in the

¹³ In 2006, G.W. Bush associated China with economic competition: "The American economy is preeminent, but we cannot afford to be complacent. In a dynamic world economy, we are seeing new competitors, like China and India, and this creates uncertainty, which makes it easier to feed people's fears. So we're seeing some old temptations return. Protectionists want to escape competition, pretending that we can keep our high standard of living while walling off our economy." (BUSH, 2006)

context of the “six-party talks” – and is once represented as a developing nation that needs help. So, China was mentioned a few times, and she was usually associated with positive words. Usually, the President represented China in positive terms, associated with cooperation. The image was more benign than in Clinton's age because Bush does not highlight human rights concerns. The discussion is indirectly, and the frequency of mentions was low, five mentions in six years.

VI. A competitor threatening America, 2009-2020

Amidst the financial crisis that was crumbling the world economy, Barack Obama was elected the president of the United States in 2008. In Obama's age, China's image suffered the most dramatic transformation in the SOTU representation since the rapprochement. It was usually represented as an economic competitor that threatens the US economy, associated many times with unfair competition.¹⁴ As Mastanduno (2014) argued, the financial crisis generated grievous concerns about China's rise in the United States.

In the first “Address to Congress” of 2009, Obama argued that the country that better develop clean and renewable energy will lead the world in the 21st century, mentioning that China launched the biggest effort in history to energy efficiency. In the SOTU 2010, Obama stated that the US has always competed and that he will invest in infrastructure, adding that there is no reason for China and Europe to have better trains or manufacturing installation to clean energy products. Obama stated that the United States cannot be in second place:

China is not waiting to revamp its economy. Germany is not waiting. India is not waiting. These nations — they're not standing still. These nations aren't playing for second place. They're putting more emphasis on math and science. They're rebuilding their infrastructure. They're making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs. Well, I do not accept second place for the United States of America. (OBAMA, 2010)

In 2011, China was represented as an economic competitor, and Obama argued that China and India were investing in technological education and that the US was lagging. However, there is a positive note stating the deal between the US and China and the US and India, that will promote thousands of jobs in the United States.

Next year was an electoral one. The Republican campaign of Mitt Romney used China as a device to attack Obama's policies for the US economy. This campaign was the one that

¹⁴ This idea was not restricted to SOTU, the President made similar representations in other speeches (YANG, 2016) and also criticized the terms of Chinese entry into the WTO in government meetings (MANN, 2012).

China was most criticized and commented on the presidential debates since the end of the Cold War (ROCHA, 2020). Then, Obama's rhetoric was tougher and he mentioned that his administration has made more cases against China in WTO: "We've brought trade cases against China at nearly twice the rate as the last administration -- and it's made a difference." (OBAMA, 2012). The President states that China does not respect Intellectual Property Rights and that he will create a "Trade Enforcement Unit" to investigate unfair trade practices, like the Chinese. Also, he states: "I will go anywhere in the world to open new markets for American products. And I will not stand by when our competitors don't play by the rules. We've brought trade cases against China at nearly twice the rate as the last administration -- and it's made a difference." (OBAMA, 2012)

In 2013, the President mentioned that China was heaving investing in clean energy and that the US cannot lag: "Solar energy gets cheaper by the year — let's drive down costs even further. As long as countries like China keep going all in on clean energy, so must we." (OBAMA, 2013). In 2014, in the fight for *Trade Promotion Authority*, Obama mentioned that it is the US, not China, the better place to make commercial deals. Also, he says that it is necessary for products made in the US to compete in the global market: "We need to work together on tools like bipartisan trade promotion authority to protect our workers, protect our environment, and open new markets to new goods stamped 'Made in the USA.' China and Europe aren't standing on the sidelines. Neither should we." (OBAMA, 2014).

The next year, the rhetoric against China was tougher, stating that Beijing was not just an economic competitor, it was trying to be a rule-maker in the trade field.¹⁵ For Obama, the United States cannot allow China to write these rules:

Today, our businesses export more than ever, and exporters tend to pay their workers higher wages. But as we speak, China wants to write the rules for the world's fastest-growing region. That would put our workers and our businesses at a disadvantage. Why would we let that happen? We should write those rules. We should level the playing field. That's why I'm asking both parties to give me trade promotion authority to protect American workers, with strong new trade deals from Asia to Europe that aren't just free, but are also fair. (OBAMA, 2015)

In the last SOTU, 2016, Obama tried to approve the Transpacific Partnership (TPP). In this context, he affirms that TPP is a device to China does not write trade rules in Asia and to preserves the US' hegemony: "With TPP, China does not set the rules in that region; we do. You want to show our strength in this new century? Approve this agreement. Give us the tools

¹⁵ In 2015, the President mentioned the climatic deal between the US and China. In this speech, he also made an indirect reference to China: "In the Asia Pacific, we are modernizing alliances while making sure that other nations play by the rules -- in how they trade, how they resolve maritime disputes, how they participate in meeting common international challenges like." (OBAMA, 2015)

to enforce it. It's the right thing to do.” (OBAMA, 2016). Therefore, in the last two years, China is not an economic competitor, but a normative competitor that could threaten US hegemony in the 21st century.¹⁶

Elected in November 2016, Donald Trump made a campaign attacking China for stealing jobs from the United States and even stated that China was an enemy of the United States. In the SOTU, the negative pattern initiated by Obama is maintained. In the first Address to Congress, Trump mentions that China's entry in WTO harmed the US economy: “We've lost more than one-fourth of our manufacturing jobs since NAFTA was approved, we've lost 60,000 factories since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.” (TRUMP, 2017)

In 2018, Trump reiterate the ideas announced in the National Security Strategy of 2017. He classified China, with Russia, as rivals to United States interests and values. This was the first time since the rapprochement that China was represented explicitly as a strategic adversary in the SOTU.¹⁷ After, Trump repeated Reagan's idea that the best defense is to be an unrivaled power and sought an increase of defense spending.

Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests, our economy, and our values. In confronting these dangers, we know that weakness is the surest path to conflict, and unmatched power is the surest means of our defense. For this reason, I am asking the Congress to end the dangerous defense sequester and fully fund our great military (TRUMP, 2018).

In 2019, Trump supported his trade policies that generated a trade war between the US and China. The President argued that China targeted US companies and steal intellectual property harming the US economy. The trade war, therefore, was a necessity and he puts tariffs in the value of 250 billion dollars against Chinese products.¹⁸ In the same speech, he stated that the United States was withdrawn from Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, but a new deal is possible if China and others are added. In 2020 SOTU, Trump restated the “China's massive theft of American jobs” and that “for decades China has taken advantage of United States”

¹⁶ Obama usually represented China in three patterns: as a benchmarking allowing the President to support his policies; as an unfair competitor that harms the US economy and workers; and as a normative competitor that seeks to undermine US power position, especially in economic terms.

¹⁷ Obama associated China with the geopolitical competition in other speeches, like the electoral debate with John McCain on September 26, 2008, or the Farewell address: “Rivals like Russia or China cannot match our influence around the world, unless we give up what we stand for and turn ourselves into just another big country that bullies smaller neighbors.” (OBAMA, 2017).

¹⁸ “We are now making it clear to China that, after years of targeting our industries and stealing our intellectual property, the theft of American jobs and wealth has come to an end. Therefore, we recently imposed tariffs on \$250 billion of Chinese goods, and now our Treasury is receiving billions and billions of dollars. But I don't blame China for taking advantage of us; I blame our leaders and representatives for allowing this travesty to happen. I have great respect for President Xi, and we are now working on a new trade deal with China. But it must include real, structural change to end unfair trade practices, reduce our chronic trade deficit, and protect American jobs.” (TRUMP, 2019)

(TRUMP. 2020). But he said that “we have perhaps the best relationship we’ve ever had with China” (*Ibid*) and states the Sino-American cooperation against Coronavirus: “We are coordinating with the Chinese government and working closely together on the coronavirus outbreak in China.” (*Ibid*).

Therefore, China was cited eleven times in the first mandate of Obama. It was associated with economic competition ten times. In the second mandate, China was cited nine times, been associated with broad economic competition eight times, where two of these associations were tougher and the President suggested that China was an economic-normative competition. In the first mandate of Trump, China was mentioned thirteen times, in eight times it was related to competition, six times the association was with economic competition and two times with the strategic competition. Hence, the major reference is to contemporary competition, the focus was direct, and the frequency of citation is high, 33 times in 11 years. There was a qualitative change concerning the three previous paradigms, and China, cited every year, was usually represented in negative terms. Despite the negative image, it cannot be argued that they were constructing China as an enemy in the SOTUs because the number of mentions is fewer compared to other threats constructions, like G.W. Bush’s speeches against Iraq. The reference is softer, and China is represented as an adversary. Both Obama and Trump represented China as a competitor that must be controlled or surpassed, a threat sometimes to the US economy and other to the US hegemony. In this aspect, the Trump election does not create a substantial change, on the contrary, it intensifies the previous logic, inserting a more hostile and hyperbolic language to represent China.

VII. Conclusions

In the years analyzed, there were qualitative changes in China’s representation in the SOTU and four paradigms could be identified. The first, 1973-1989, China is mentioned sporadically and is not associated with negative elements for American society, like communism or human rights problems. China is usually praised and represented with positive words, like peace, grandiosity, stability, or economic freedom. This pattern disappeared after June 1989. With the crumbling of the Cold War and domestic pressure against his China’s policy, Bush silenced and not mentioned China in the last three SOTUs.

The end of the Cold War and Clinton’s election allowed the rise of a new discursive paradigm. In 1994-2000, China is mentioned more frequently and is associated with a negative present due to human rights behavior, but a positive future could be achieved if the US

maintained normal relations with Beijing. In this period, the mentions are more frequent, especially in the tough debate about China's entry into the WTO. In these years, China is represented as a repressive state that could be free if the US maintained normal relations, especially in trade.

The election of G. W. Bush and the 11th September terrorist attack created a new pattern. In the third paradigm, between 2002-2008, China's mentions are sporadically and usually associated with a positive present due to Sino-American cooperation against the North Korean nuclear program.

The financial crisis of 2008 and Barack Obama's election made another qualitatively change. At the fourth paradigm, 2009-2020, China was mentioned with greater frequency and was associated with a negative present. It was generally characterized as an unfair economic competitor. With Trump's administration, the pattern of contemporary threat was widened. Also, China started to be represented as a strategic adversary and the words regarding this country were sharper. Due to the duration and the resistance to the change of party in the White House, this paradigm appears to have strong rootedness.

Table 1. China's images in the State of The Union Address, 1973-2020.

Paradigm	Basic Axiology	Focus	Frequency (mentions/years)
1973-1989	Positive	Direct	Low (0,5)
1994-2000	Mixed	Direct	High (3,6)
2002-2008	Positive	Indirect	Low (0,8)
2009-2020	Negative	Direct	High (2,8)

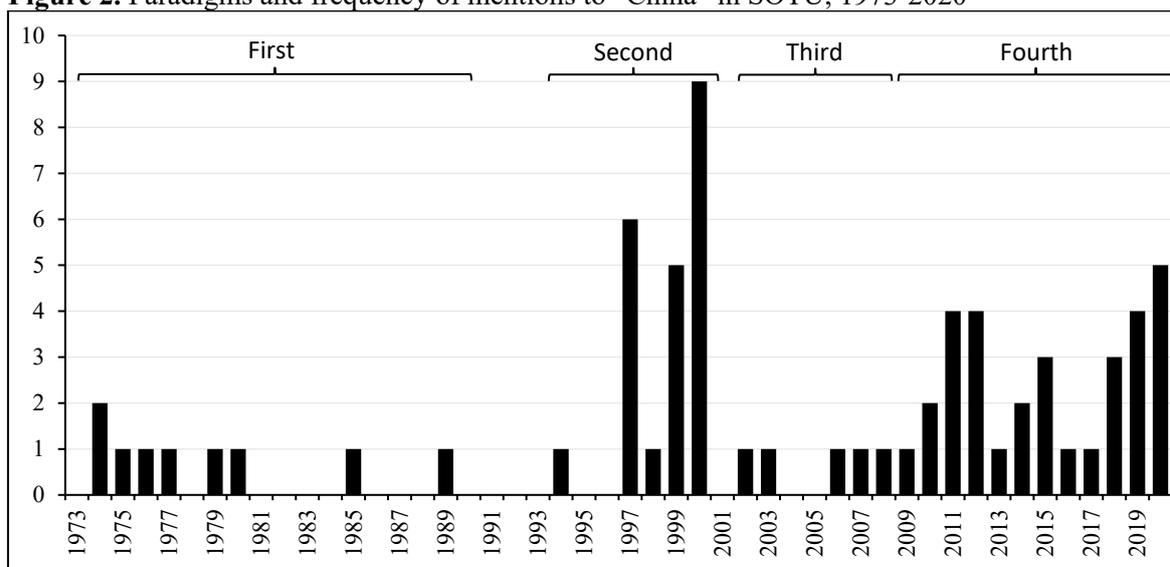
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Therefore, China's image undergone important changes and was not constructed idiosyncratically by each government. In the first and fourth paradigms, the image was not modified after the victory of the opposition in presidential elections. Even the third paradigm can be indicated as more than a Clinton one because the argument was introduced by George Bush in the context of Tiananmen (See MANN, 2000). Hence, in the period of analysis, there were nine presidents, six changes of parties in the White House, and fourth patterns of China's images. This suggests that the change was more related to external shocks – like the end of the Cold War, the 11th September attack, or the 2008 financial crisis – than to electoral results.

The analysis also highlighted the correlation between US foreign policy towards China and the domestic representation of this country. Though the signaling is not necessarily transparent, the presidential words are not cheap talk (KAUFMANN, 2004; ROCHA, 2020). The Clinton support of China's entry into the WTO and the Bush initiative of Six-Party talks

were announced in the SOTU. Also, at the same time that Obama represented China as a competitor, the US policy towards China was much more aggressive in trade terms, even though Obama's method involved plurilateral and multilateral actions rather than Trump's preference for unilateralism. The SOTU is, therefore, an important channel to access aspects of US foreign policy towards China, and changes in the speech suggest new policy directions.

Figure 2. Paradigms and frequency of mentions to “China” in SOTU, 1973-2020



Source: data extracted from the SOTUs. Authors' elaboration.

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