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TAYLOR, Antony <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4635-4897>>

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'Ghost Fleet': Populism, the Presidency, and Chinese Invasion Panics in Recent US Popular Fiction

Antony Taylor, Emeritus Professor of Modern British History Sheffield Hallam University

Email: t.taylor1@shu.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the appeal, commentary on and political responses to the novel *Ghost Fleet* published in 2015, which imagines the course of an armed military conflict between the United States and China. Examining the major themes of the work, it places the book in context, and analyses its position in relation to older traditions of anti-Chinese hostility precipitated by Chinese migration to the US and across the Asia Pacific Rim Region. Locating the work in a number of established narratives that scrutinise issues of US and imperial decline, and considering the origins of the novel in the 'invasion panic' genre, this article also engages with recent arguments about populism and the role of Donald Trump as heir to an American populist tradition with its roots in the nineteenth century. The article concludes by considering the impact of the work in shaping the responses of US policy planners and the presidency to an economically and militarily ascendant China.

Key Words:

Introduction

Published in 2015, the novel *Ghost Fleet* reached a wide readership in the dying days of the Obama presidency. Sub-titled 'a novel of the next world war' it achieved the status of a publishing sensation, evoked comparison with the works of Tom Clancy and Herman Wouk and attracted enthusiastic support from prestigious reviewers like D. B. Weiss, executive producer of *Game of Thrones*, and retired Admiral James Stavridis, former supreme allied commander of NATO.¹ Capturing the frenetic mood in Washington during a period of increased Sino-US tension and channelling fears of a potential economic and military expansion of China's influence across South-East Asia and into north and central Africa, the novel highlighted fears of a weakening of the United States' influence across the globe. A 'must read' novel for the summer of 2015 that provided 'testimony to growing American fears of China's Rise' was the international relations historian Robert S. Singh's verdict on the book's popularity amongst policy planners in Washington during this period.² Like William Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910*, written in 1906, to which it was compared, much significance was claimed for *Ghost Fleet*. The book was seen as capturing a moment of tension and anxiety in global diplomacy and became a jeremiad for deep-rooted fears about the imminent contraction of an American imperium in the face of competition across Asia.³ Rising tensions between China and the US over tariffs under the second Trump presidency has given the book a new relevance. Moreover, the book stands in a long tradition of nativist hostility to Chinese incomers and migrants to the US expressed through fiction that although never explicitly stated, is apparent in some of the tropes and narratives used throughout the volume.

American imperium threatened

Written by former defence consultants and strategists, P. W. Singer and August Cole and given academic credibility by the inclusion of endnotes and a critical apparatus, *Ghost Fleet* might be described as a 'techno-thriller'. Heavily influenced by video game culture, and informed by the latest developments in weapons technology, it draws on strategic and policy planning debates to assess the potential for conflict between the US and China's interests. A breathless endorsement on the cover of the second edition of the book from *Yahoo News* comments: 'It's like the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot meets *Band of Brothers* meets *Hunt for Red October* meets *Call of Duty*'.⁴ The book self-consciously located itself in the 'next war' tradition. In their acknowledgements, the authors pay tribute to Tom Clancy and Larry Bond's *Red Storm Rising* that imagined the course of a conventional war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War era and Arthur Conan Doyle's visions of apocalyptic conflicts and an imperilled humanity arising from his belief in spiritualism.⁵ The character of Major Conan Doyle in the novel is a direct tribute to Arthur Conan Doyle.⁶ These references invoked the tradition of predictive invasion fiction as a 'wake up' call for societies in a state of advanced torpor and decadence in the manner of H. G. Wells' *The War in the Air* which warned against 'the collapse of civilisation under the strain of modern war' in comments inspired by events in Russia during and after 1917.⁷ The volume also recalled the dire prognostications of Hector Charles Bywater in fictional outpourings in the years after the Great War that a conflict between the US and Asia was inevitable and an invasion by Japan of US territory would occur in 1931 from jumping off points in the Philippines.⁸

The work corresponds to similar fiction emerging from the heightened 'cultural atmosphere' noted by Michael Matin as a product of 9/11 and its aftermath and debates about the political and military preparedness of the United States to withstand external threats or internal subversion during an era of military overstretch.⁹ During this period, post-

Cold War expectations that China would be successfully integrated into the west's economic framework after the collapse of Soviet Communism (even after Tiananmen Square in 1989) were misplaced.¹⁰ The book draws on concerns and anxieties arising from the shift away from the United States' uni-power position in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a transition to an irreversible multipolarity in the world order, and the apparent retreat of the United States' global dominance, fostering an animated internal conversation about the US's enfeebled global role in a pluralist world order. China's industrial rise, shocks to the western financial system following the 2008 economic crash, the success of the summer 2008 Beijing Olympics at a time of western contraction, escalating tension between the US and China in the South China Seas around Taiwan, and the suppression of pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong, provided the backdrop to international diplomacy during the Obama, Trump and Biden presidencies. These flashpoints superseded the relative diplomatic calm of the Reagan-Bush-Deng Xiaoping years.¹¹ Subsequently, China's 'belt and road' initiative (BRI) extending China's influence across Asia, Africa, and South America, and the country's success in mobilising diaspora communities behind its economic advance, has accentuated these tensions. *Ghost Fleet* demonstrates that fears of China's expanding 'soft power' cohere around online revelations, leaks and exposures of subterfuge, revealing apparently more muscular and hidden ambitions by Beijing to expand China's global dominance that are masked by supposedly benign interventions.¹²

In the face of these apparent threats, anxieties about the fragility of US power draw on deep-seated fears about the rise of anti-Americanism in Europe, fresh challenges to US global pre-eminence, the difficulties of assimilating an Asian and East Asian economic acceleration into a US global trade and business model, and the perceived unreliability of long-standing allies in the aftermath of the withdrawal of US power from Europe with a

consonant enfeeblement of NATO.¹³ The weakening of the US' position in the western Pacific in particular, which it dominated during the Cold War period, the evacuation of its bases in the Philippines in 1992, and the expansion of Chinese interests in the region, made the area into a new theatre of tension between the two powers and the scene of much of the military action in *Ghost Fleet*.¹⁴

Genre and the 'future' war

Ghost Fleet draws on a number of different genres, combining elements of science fiction, invasion panic, and science fantasy. Its main themes reflect the decay and contraction of empire (both formal and informal) and the cataclysmic sense of role reversal should the formerly colonised and marginalised take on the role of invader and conqueror in turn.¹⁵ Much of this debate hinges on technological innovation. For Singer, in common with much predictive 'future war' fiction, the frontiers of the 'next war' are to be defined by the increased pace of technological change around artificial intelligence, robotics, and cyber terrorism. As Matin comments, there are marked similarities between the role of the United States and external threats to its global status, and the position of the embattled British empire, imperilled and enfeebled by the emergence of rival empires and technologically advanced economies in the years before the outbreak of the Great War.¹⁶

The importance and impact of *Ghost Fleet* are therefore two-fold. It updates past anxieties about a declining US, locating them in a contemporary context whilst drawing on an established literary heritage that highlighted concerns about defence, national security and race enfeeblement that were apparent in different forms during periods of perceived crisis in US domestic politics. It foregrounds these issues as enduring themes in American culture and politics. Reference might be made here to the moral panics surrounding

Communism in the US during the 1950s when concerns around the scale of the US's commitments abroad, coupled with a rapid pace of domestic social and cultural change fed a strong sense of cultural unease. Politically, such sentiments coalesced around an anti-Communist banner. As with the anti-Chinese sentiments behind *Ghost Fleet*, these anxieties were apparent in film, television, theatre, pageant culture, and in popular fiction.¹⁷ Further, they amplified the vulnerabilities of the American public at a time of international tension, raising questions, according to Richard Hofstadter, about the psychology, outlook, and mental wellbeing of the citizenry of the US.¹⁸

Following Matin's comments, *Ghost Fleet* bears comparison with the tone of pre-1914 British invasion panic fiction during a similar period of crisis for the British empire. Taking different formats at different times, invasion panic fiction is an established genre that reflects and channels the anxieties of populations believing themselves under siege. As in the works of William Le Queux in Britain which achieved wide circulation, *Ghost Fleet* highlights military unpreparedness, complacency, and technical obsolescence, and charts the fragility and erosion of US power on the model of the decline of the British empire – the 'empire blues' noted by David Stafford in his study of espionage fiction from the period of the pre-Great War era onwards.¹⁹ The book also references the work of pre-1914 US naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan whose emphasis on sea power influenced the expansion of the German fleet in the years before the Great War.²⁰ Evidence for the distribution and readership of *Ghost Fleet* is partial, but like Le Queux's novels in the years before the Great War, it circulated widely amongst policy planners, intelligence agencies, and journalists, and was much cited by an agitated populace in popular discourse. An impressionistic assessment of the book's reception places it in a tradition of literature characterised by a culture of 'jingoistic' saviours in popular fiction, and it may be possible to see comparisons in its appeal

to a largely male constituency to the readership for Le Queux's adventure and thriller fiction in Britain.²¹ Feeding into a bellicose public mood, recent polling suggests that a majority of the American public would support armed conflict waged in support of US interests in the event of Chinese aggression.²²

These themes of over-stretch and military weakness feature elsewhere in quasi-apocalyptic fiction prophesying the end of American imperium. In John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), the United States' decrepitude is so advanced in the aftermath of a limited nuclear war between the US and China, that the country is held together only by Fedex, rather than by any functioning government.²³ In Chris Mullin's political thriller, *The Friends of Harry Perkins* (2019), the events of the novel also unfold against the background of escalating tensions between Japan and China heralding a wider US involvement in a Pacific conflict.²⁴ In *Ghost Fleet*, China's military ambitions have become amplified by the overthrow of Communist Party bosses by the army mobilised to restore order after civilian riots on the Tiananmen Square model, and the establishment of a revanchist Directorate dedicated to the support of expanded trade routes and investments.²⁵ Its aims and objectives, though, remain consonant with the global aspirations and ambitions evident in the imperial tianxia system – 'all under heaven' – that placed China at the centre of the global order, justified the subjugation of neighbouring provinces, and remains a potent point of post-imperial reference for China's current Communist Party leader, Xi Jinping. China's primary opponent remains the US in tensions that have increased since the end of the Cold War.²⁶

Throughout, *Ghost Fleet* contains meditations on the weakness and insufficiency of trade agreements and the fragility of the global economic order in maintaining a peaceful

balance of global power with reference back to the failure of pre-1914 free trade agreements, in particular. Simmonds, commander of the embattled USS Coronado in the book, comments: 'Who was Britain's biggest trading partner before World War I? Germany. Or if you prefer World War II as a comparison, Germany's biggest trading partners just before the war were the very neighbours it soon invaded'.²⁷ Making this comparison explicit, the novel discusses the determination of former world empires confronted by trade contraction, and with domestic populations unenthused by the mission to continue pre-existing global commitments, to hang on in the face of destabilising and detrimental decolonization struggles: 'About a hundred years back the British Empire faced a problem much like ours today. How do you police an empire when you've got a shrinking economy relative to the world's and a population no longer so excited to meet those old commitments?'²⁸ The plot also interacts with a foreign policy position that describes China's global ambitions as opaque and difficult to interpret and in which, according to Singh, China 'represents a modern version of Wilhelmine Germany'.²⁹ The comparison between the rise of China and late nineteenth-century Germany was a widely discussed one in the years after the millennium: academics like John C. Mearsheimer claimed that China's powerful position, as in the case of Germany from the 1870s, made an armed conflict between the US and China increasingly likely.³⁰

Predecessors and 'sensation' fiction

Ghost Fleet draws on a number of predecessors and influences that warned about the perils of Asian expansion. One influence remained a genre preoccupied with Chinese migrant incomers and their role in potentially compromising the future of the republic. By the later

nineteenth century, the presence of the Chinese in North America had evolved from visibility in theatrical, music hall, and entertainment culture into flourishing communities on the West Coast and an established port-side service role in New York as well as a cultural presence as street vendors and pedlars.³¹ Chinese migrants, however, were symbolic of a landscape of overcrowded tenements and poverty in US cities like New York, where 'yellow press' journalists on the model of Jacob Riis highlighted the failure to integrate of incomer populations, depicted as imported into the US by people trafficking gangs through illegal and clandestine means. Their presence was perceived as heralding civic disintegration and a fracture of the body politic.³² The inflow of global migrants into the US stoked opposition to Chinese incomers, prompting governments to adopt border controls, entry restrictions under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and migration monitoring in the form of passports.³³ Underpinning these ideas were the works of progressivist economists like Richard T. Ely, who estimated a 'coolie' model of subsistence that highlighted the apparent ability of Chinese incomers to 'underlive' American labour, requiring the legislative exclusion of Chinese labour to be made permanent when the Chinese Exclusion Act was scheduled for renewal.³⁴

Images of China as a threat were a recurrent feature of sensation fiction in the United States. Such fiction cultivated the anti-Chinese and anti-migrant sentiments that were formative for emergent labour parties and organised trade union movements across the Anglophone Pacific south. As Marilyn Lake has demonstrated, responses to the Chinese diaspora were governed by kindred fears and anxieties across white settler societies, prompting legislative attempts to exclude, and popular movements opposed to the import of, Chinese labour.³⁵ Maritime workers living ambient lives often pooled their grievances in joint opposition to 'Asiatic labour' in action that spanned the British empire from the UK to South Africa and New Zealand during the 1925 seamen's strike. In 1907 the Second

International at its congress in Amsterdam discussed restrictive action against migrant Chinese and Black labour, promoted by US, Australian, and Dutch delegates.³⁶ Mobile and transnational trade union groups like the Knights of Labor brought their anti-Chinese prejudices with them across the Atlantic to Britain. *Justice*, the organ of the socialist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) threatened that 'if they are brought in here with their unspeakably filthy Asiatic manners and customs and generally low standard of life as a kind of blackleg to supplant British workers, either as domestic servants or anything else, there will be trouble'.³⁷ These comments matched fears of a 'complete orientalised of its labour' in the Australian colonies and escalating anxieties about the small population of 5,000 Chinese miners in New Zealand.³⁸ This period also saw the emergence of orators and demagogues like William Lane in Australia and Denis Kearney in the United States, both migrants, who depicted themselves as 'protecting' the interests of white migrant labour. Their platforms embraced anti-Chinese sentiment combined with an emphasis on workers' rights that coincided with heightened periods of labour agitation like the 1877 strikes across the US and maritime strikes in the Australian colonies in 1890-1. Subsequently, they provided a policy legacy to later insurgent populists.³⁹ Moreover, in the United States, the Australian colonies, and New Zealand many trade unions produced 'white' labelled products with messages that encouraged consumers not to buy goods made by Chinese labour in a system outlined in *The Co-operative News*, for January 9, 1897. In the United States in 1870, orchestrated anti-Chinese demonstrations by working-men occurred in Tompkins Square in New York, and recurred in California in 1877, establishing the foundations for a campaign in support of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 proposed by the Republican senator, James G. Blaine in an attempt to garner support for the Republicans in California. As well as erecting barriers to the admission of Chinese incomers, under the terms of the act, Chinese migrants

already resident in the United States were forced to leave and to seek readmission to the United States.⁴⁰ This background situated the politics of nativism, protectionism, producerism, and anti-immigrant feeling at the heart of political platforms that sought to delineate US national identity through vivid and demeaning definitions of ‘others’.⁴¹ It produced a rhetoric that categorised Chinese incomers as ‘cheap labour’, impossible to integrate into domestic work patterns. These unabashed populist tones continued in the writings of the political left as well as on the conservative right, featuring in the savagely racist short story ‘The Unparalleled Invasion’, published in 1910 by the socialist writer Jack London, in which a war of extermination is waged by the Western powers against China using germ warfare reducing China to ‘a howling wilderness’, thereafter open to colonisation by the West.⁴² The story contributed to London’s persona as a combative rhetorical pugilist, utilising the populist language of the frontier, or, as expressed by George Orwell, he conveyed an image of a not ‘fully civilised man’.⁴³ The motifs London cited and the style of his story recurred in the narratives of populist agitators from the Great War period onwards, and in movements like Trumpism that have laid claim to the populist mantle.

Novels that instilled crude anti-Chinese stereotypes abounded in the later part of the nineteenth century, and, in the style of future war fiction, traded in dire warnings about the potential for an emergent China to subvert the stability of the United States. Pierton W. Dooner’s *The Last Days of the Republic*, published in 1880, imagined a United States hollowed out by the subversive actions of migrant Chinese labourers who undermine the US by acts of sabotage and violence from within. In the book’s preface, Dooner makes clear that the book should be taken as a warning ‘for the twentieth, and not for the nineteenth century’ recommending ‘some timely act of administrative foresight’ that ‘may avert the impending catastrophe, which, at this period, menaces not only our civilization, but, indeed, our very

existence'.⁴⁴ The prophetic and admonitory tone of the novel, sought, in the manner of William Le Queux's fiction, to instil in the reader a profound sense of anxiety towards opposing and non-white nations like China and Japan should their progress remained unchecked. It prefigures the later apocalyptic tone of *Ghost Fleet*. Such fears were cross-Pacific in nature (similar to the pattern of military engagements in *Ghost Fleet*) and followed the Chinese migratory circuit across that ocean. Dooner highlighted the dangers to white settler societies he saw posed by the Chinese communities of the Pacific Coast and across a pan-Pacific region bounded by the Eastern Australian seaboard, New Zealand, and the Pacific North-West in the US. For contemporaries, the emergence of ghettoised and segregated Chinese communities in Australasian white settler cities accentuated the apparent threat posed by the Chinese.⁴⁵ In *Ghost Fleet*, the theme of 'manifest destiny', seen as central to the internal colonisation of the US and to the expansion of white settler society across the Americas and the Pacific, becomes inverted, and it is the decay of US interests and China's conquest of former US territories by both population movements and military subjugation which is, instead, inevitable. Retaining fears of migrants and incomers traditionally present in invasion panic fiction, *Ghost Fleet* channels residual hostility to expatriate Chinese communities, now seen as agents of growth achieved by stealth and through a primary allegiance to homeland where the contribution of the diaspora Chinese is more valued than formerly.⁴⁶

British Orientalism and Fu Manchu

Central to *Ghost Fleet*'s preoccupations are the pre-existing genre of novels that relate to China's rise to global superpower status and the threat it poses to the United States' economic and political supremacy. Trace elements remain here of the British fixation

on the threat posed by the failure of the programme of foreign-supported, free trade modernisation from above that was at the heart of British-led informal imperialism in Asia. For some the true essence of China's threat to the West was posed by the potential for colonisation of the disintegrating and enfeebled empire of the Manchus by Britain's imperial rivals and 'a Yellow Peril organised and utilised by powers such as Germany and Russia'.⁴⁷ Anxieties about the deadly impact if China's untapped resources fell under the sway of other empires remained a marked feature of the years before the Great War. Such fears were underpinned by worries that China had ceased to be a stagnant society in decline that merely repeated its mistakes, but, instead, was on a road towards cultural and economic rejuvenation.⁴⁸ By the 1900s those who expressed anxieties about China's potential hoped that the spirit of nationalism would remain dormant after the failure of the Boxer risings in 1899-1901: 'China sometimes turns in her sleep of ages, but she never awakens' was the verdict.⁴⁹ The British author and expatriate politician in Victoria, Australia, Charles Pearson, however, dreaded the day, when 'we shall wake to find ourselves elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples we looked down upon as servile, and we thought of as bound always to minister to our needs'.⁵⁰ His predictive work, *National Life and Character* (1893), sub-titled, "*a forecast*" channelled the anxieties and concerns about the threats to white imperial rule that accompanied the dawning of a new century in 1900.⁵¹ In the world of popular fiction, China was increasingly seen as moving away from the status of a supplicant state dependent on foreign trade and the 'treaty ports'. Images of fantastical battles in which a China reinvigorated by a French-style revolution defeated and humiliated the Western powers abounded, even in the soberest accounts of 'Yellow Perils'. The British writer Lloyd Sanders imagined a Germany helpless and exposed should her fleet be

destroyed in a Chinese offensive, and a Russia weakened for battle with Chinese legions by its reliance on ill-disciplined and poorly led conscript troops.⁵²

Like the 'future war' fiction that envisaged a conflict between Britain and Germany before 1914, numerous novels espoused a sensationalist view of the Orient as a threat, incapable of control by the Western powers in plots characterised by the machinations of villains with grotesque and overblown character traits. Such themes also featured in a tradition of imperial melodrama on the stage, dominated by orientalist visions and images of the exotic.⁵³ Whilst omitted from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the Chinese inhabited the same frame of reference detected by him in Western treatments of Arabic culture in the Middle East, in which tropes of guile, dishonesty, and cunning were paramount. Indeed, in Said's work, the Far East might lay greater claim to the status of 'the great complementary opposite' of the West than the Arab World.⁵⁴ In the British novelist Sax Rohmer's fourteen novels about the Chinese supervillain, Dr. Fu Manchu, produced after 1912, the 'devil doctor' came to represent both a moral and a political threat to occidental interests, initially in Asia, but, thereafter, in the heart of the empire itself, in the capital city of London.⁵⁵ A prototype of the powerful Chinese criminal warlord, wielding advanced technologies and dealing out refined tortures to his enemies, Fu Manchu symbolised the perils of hyper-intellectualism (in the novels he has two medical degrees from the University of Edinburgh) and the cruelty arising from a lack of exposure to Christian morality that was seen as a defining feature of the 'heathenism' that resulted from the failure of missionary attempts to convert mainland Chinese and Chinese migrants in North America.⁵⁶ In the books he is depicted as a representative of the Chinese mandarin class which fascinated outsiders - they were seen as pitiless, remote, mannered, cultivated, yet cruel. Furthermore, his name recalls the Manchu dynasty that ruled China until 1912 and indicates the scope of his imperial

ambitions. These ‘Rohmeresque’ elements linger in much popular fiction relating to China.⁵⁷ Something of Fu Manchu’s torture dungeon also survives in a scene of interrogation in *Ghost Fleet*, in which invasive optic fibres are inserted into the brain of a suspected double agent, which are then torn out, instantly killing the agent.⁵⁸ Despite their British inflection, the Fu Manchu books reached a wide market in the United States, providing the basis for early cinematic representations of Chinese villainy.⁵⁹

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Popular fears and populism

In *Ghost Fleet* older images of feudal Chinese super-villains, the white slave trade and opium dens are superseded by the fear of technological innovation that subsequently underlay Donald Trump’s imposition of tariffs on the import of high-tech Chinese goods during his first presidency.⁶⁰ In the novel, China’s ruling Directorate shows no restraint in its use of total war strategies, and the book channels concerns about a merciless amoral application of technology imposed without regard to casualties and outcomes on infrastructure and civilian populations. Here computer viruses deployed to paralyse US defences act as an echo of the contagion and diseases like cholera and smallpox often associated with Chinese migrant communities that traditionally featured in populist discourse. These attitudes were in a long tradition, drawing on the western disdain for different dietary practices and traditions around food, religion, and burial customs, that in the nineteenth-century led to accusations that the itinerant Chinese were vectors for epidemics like cholera and bubonic plague. Such rumours circulated widely after the

discovery of bubonic plague cases in California in 1900.⁶¹ These ideas received a new impetus in Trump's categorisation of Covid-19 during his first presidency as the 'China virus'.

Books that painted a larger canvass of Chinese military ambitions and economic aspirations gained a greater currency in the aftermath of the Second World War and the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. They provide something of a template for *Ghost Fleet*. These volumes detected a threat from a revived post-war Japan and the expansion of Communism across East and South-East Asia. An internal political culture in China that oscillated between turmoil and external strength, West Coast US invasion fears, fuelled by memories of Pearl Harbor and by Cold War 'Hot' conflicts in South-East Asia, nuclear testing by China in 1969 and notions of 'domino effects' in the proliferation of Asian Communism were further factors in the rise of the perceived Chinese threat.⁶² Most fiction in this tradition represented the vulnerability of the US to the strength of a hybrid, undifferentiated 'Orient', that framed a threat of economic competition and military adventurism across the region. Right populists like Trump, schooled in the US/Japanese automobile trade wars of the 1980s, make little distinction between the economic competition from Japan and China, seeing them as part of an undifferentiated Asiatic commercial threat. Trump declared during his first presidential term in relation to trade tariffs, that Japan 'was interchangeable with China, interchangeable with other countries. But it's all the same thing'.⁶³

This attitude is in a long tradition. Robert Heinlein's *Sixth Column* serialised in 1941 but appearing as a novel in 1949 in the year of the formation of the People's Republic of China, and rightly reviled for its extreme racism, depicted the formation of a guerrilla underground in the US to oppose conquest by a PanAsian army, spearheaded by a combined Chinese-

Japanese occupier. Heinlein's merged Sinicised-led menace had roots in nineteenth-century plot devices, notably M. P. Shiels' vision of a Chinese expansion orchestrated by Japan in *The Yellow Danger* (1898) in which the West falls victim to the combined might of an emergent 'Asia' that blends the population reservoir of China with the acquired technological and administrative skills assimilated into Japanese bureaucratic systems under western tutelage.⁶⁴

In Jack London's 'The Unparalleled Invasion', Japan is the tutor and mentor of a Chinese renaissance: 'China was at last awake. Where the West had failed, Japan succeeded. She had transmuted Western culture and achievements into terms that were intelligible to Chinese understanding'.⁶⁵ Here the threat posed by the vision of the unstoppable hordes of Asia, fused with images of the ability of Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912) to adopt and refine the military, industrial, and commercial strategies of the West in an effort to avoid the fate of a dismembered China at the hands of the European powers.⁶⁶ In response to these anxieties, the anti-Asian invasion panic genre was already well developed in Asian-facing white settler societies like Australia, where fantasies like Erle Cox's *Fool's Harvest* (1939) and *The Invasion* (1968) imagined an Asian occupation driven by restless population expansion and Australia's defeat following dependence on unreliable allies that reduces the white population to slave status and Australia to the role of an 'Austral-Asia'.⁶⁷ Continuing the tradition of blurring the face of the opponent, in *Ghost Fleet*, China is post-Communist, but attacks Pearl Harbor in a move that inevitably evokes memories of the Japanese surprise attack on the base in December 1941.⁶⁸ The surprise attack theme on the model of Pearl Harbor was present in other books inspired by invasion panic anxieties. In *The Invasion*, published in 1968 at the high-point of the Vietminh Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War, and which imagined a surprise attack on Australia by 'the Armada' of an undefined South-East Asian Republic: 'Resistance was slight: as it is when countries are still old-fashioned enough to put their faith in treaties'.⁶⁹

As in many contemporary and subsequent depictions of the role of the Vietminh mediated through the experience of occupation and resistance during the American and Australian intervention in Vietnam, these images carried representations of duplicity, betrayal, and the untrustworthy features seen as characteristic of the 'Oriental' mind.⁷⁰

In both *Sixth Column* and *Ghost Fleet*, the authors evoke a decline of the West precedent, symbolic for populism, in which decadence, irreligion, a decline in martial spirit, and debilitating rivalries between the western powers sap the national will to resist: in one heated exchange, characters discuss whether a nuclear option might serve as a punishment for states that refused to support their US allies with targets in Paris, Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo, 'for not stepping up to join a fight an ocean away from them' with 'no more of that reimagining our world bullshit from those eunuchs on tv'.⁷¹ Such sentiments echoed late nineteenth-century fears of the ability of a rejuvenated Asia to overwhelm an enfeebled and degenerate West. Images of Britain 'with that industrial apathy which many political observers regard as the first beginnings of decadence' failing to control incoming Chinese migrants, and prefiguring the declining US of *Ghost Fleet*, featured heavily in such treatments.⁷² The Australian radical press also imagined an Asia cheered by the conflicts between the western powers during the Great War and simply biding its time before acting: 'whilst the whites are butchering each other, Asia is waiting and grinning'.⁷³ In Australia and New Zealand, images of a declining West were defined by anxieties around the decay of empire and military enfeeblement in the inter-war period, with a recognition that a British change of priorities to defence of informal possessions in the Middle East and away from formal colonies in the Far East had left Singapore and British allies in the region vulnerable to Japan in 1941-2.⁷⁴ These visions of a declining West, where a rupture with the prosperity of the pre-1914 world had locked the European powers into a spiral of military, economic, and political decline, were

formative for speculative fiction that imagined the West in terminal dissolution.⁷⁵ In these novelistic depictions, as in current Sino-US tension, Europe is a bystander. In *Ghost Fleet*, despite the intensity of the conflict, the European states remain resolutely non-aligned; in *Sixth Column* there is a 'final blackout' in Europe in an apocalyptic fate that is never fully explained.⁷⁶

The memory of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 and the humiliation of the established Russian empire by a newly emergent Asiatic power also lingered in these narratives. Absent from the military action in both *Sixth Column* and *Ghost Fleet* is a bellicose Russian presence reflective of the inability of the Russian Federation to challenge the United States' economic pre-eminence at the end of the Cold War and its diminished global role thereafter; in *Sixth Column*, Russia is simply assimilated by the PanAsian Federation; in *Ghost Fleet*, Russia is reduced to a subaltern status by an emergent China.⁷⁷ In both novels, in the face of the collapse of conventional military forces, US soldiers take on the role of resistance fighters, leading insurgencies that, in the case of *Ghost Fleet*, apply the military techniques learnt by US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq against occupiers in Hawaii.⁷⁸ Here it is US forces that adopt the role of a guerrilla resistance, reversing the traditional position of nationalist-inspired local resistance units waging mismatched asymmetrical warfare against occupying powers. Drawing on what has been termed 'American paramilitary culture', this narrative allowed for the revitalisation of a post-Vietnam masculine pioneer and survivalist culture in the face of the disruption of traditional urban hierarchies of power and control.⁷⁹

Ghost Fleet is perhaps less influenced by a tradition that imagined a seaborne assault on the US launched against California's beaches than its predecessors. In the book, San Francisco is a relatively quiet zone in the fictional war defended only by the National Guard.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, California's vulnerability remains a point of reference, acknowledging the central role of the west coast in invasion panic fiction recurrent in the popular imagination since Pearl Harbor, and coloured by the devastating and apocalyptic imaginings of groups like the Pentecostal church that emerged in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. For these reasons, California was traditionally seen as a site for conflict and infrastructural fragmentation, apparent in Heinlein's *Sixth Column*.⁸¹ In *Ghost Fleet* it remains a cipher for US decadence and decline. *Sixth Column* took as its lesson the tendency of empires to tolerate indigenous religions, specifically referencing the British empire in this regard: 'Isn't it a historical fact that all successful empires have tolerated the local religions no matter what else they suppressed?' remarks one resistance fighter.⁸² Setting the action in California, notoriously home to exotic and recondite cults, non-Christian philosophies, and spiritualities partly imported by refugees from Europe in the 1930s, Heinlein draws on images of 'that westernmost place for the brightest and darkest manifestations of the American Dream' where alternative faiths flourished in a healthy climate in which the roots of traditional established religious observance were shallow.⁸³ Sketching out the basis for a resistance organisation, which disguises its objectives under the cloak of organised religion, this factor allowed Heinlein to draw on the state's esoteric background and mock California's tendency to incubate cults and 'new religious movements': 'This will just look like any one of half a dozen cockeyed cults of the sort that spring up overnight in Southern California' remarks one enthusiast for the scheme.⁸⁴ Indeed, the resistance movement wear outlandish robes, carry staves, and conspire in temples – their leader 'dressed in emerald robes that brushed the floor. White hair and flowing beard framed a face of benign dignity'. In their costumes they resemble Old Testament patriarchs.⁸⁵

The fears evoked by *Ghost Fleet* reached their fullest expression under the first Trump administration. The 'pivot to Asia' under the Obama presidency raised concerns about the erosion of the United States' global role. The policy was rejected by Trump, whose platform saw a reversion to the position of strengthening domestic industry and imposing tariffs on Chinese trade. Bob Woodward in his 'tell-all' study of the first Trump presidency noted the Trump administration's obsession with Chinese theft of 'intellectual property...from American companies that had been required to move their technology to China to operate there'.⁸⁶ In 2016, the year after the publication of *Ghost Fleet*, Trump announced that he knew how to reverse American humiliation and beat China, by applying his business experience with Chinese corporations: 'They kill us (but) I beat China all the time'.⁸⁷ Trump's trade war drew on the established narrative of countering China's economic competition and military threat across East and South-East Asia. His 'America First' rhetoric during his presidency revived a populist narrative of outsiders and incomers threatening employment and the prosperity and stability of US industry. In Woodward's account of Steve Bannon's briefings with Trump in preparation for his first presidential nomination, Bannon asserts: 'Populism was for the common man, knowing the system is rigged. It was against crony capitalism and insider deals which were bleeding the workers. "I love that. That's what I am", Trump said, "a popularist." He mangled the word'.⁸⁸

The tradition of populism in the US was always heavily racialised, pitting producers and small proprietors against established elites in the south, accused of using 'pressed' Black convicts and migrants to slash production and labour costs. Moreover, populism traded in visions of an idealised, undifferentiated 'people' corresponding to the white Christian farming communities of the mid-West, which, with its built-in hostility to pluralism, allocated no role to groups like the Chinese in the foundation of the nation and the construction of

infrastructure in the building of the trans-continental railways.⁸⁹ Trumpian populist ideas and a politics of constructing protective barriers to ward off incomers had precedents in these campaigns by populist farmers' groups on the US west coast to drive out itinerant Chinese field workers employed by large estate owners, seen as detrimental to the interests of smallholders, and in campaigns to restrict access to land to further migrants.⁹⁰ For his advisor and, briefly, guru, Steve Bannon, Trump was an incarnation of this older populist style '...a modern-day William Jennings Bryan' whose style and body-language acted as an antidote to the measured cadences of Obama and whose objectives were primarily about the protection of the rights of American workers.⁹¹ Like Trump's MAGA Republicans in 2016, Bryan's following drew on a traditional base of white supporter, 'most were white Christians from "old stock" European roots: British, German and Irish, with a sprinkling of Scandinavians' and, 'defined by the sheer repetitiveness of their devotion'. Like him, Bryan rejected the complexity of urban culture in American cities in favour of rural communities, mining an entrenched divide described by one author as 'near existential'.⁹² Similarly, Bryan, in the manner of Trump, was dismissive of Asia and the Middle East as 'mired in poverty and cultural backwardness', (although Bryan admired the achievements of Meiji era Japan) but his emphasis on the perils posed by East Asia was prescient for later populists.⁹³ Bannon commented: 'China's everything. Nothing else matters. We don't get China right, we don't get anything right...You're going to have a hyper nationalist state and once that happens you can't put the genie back in the bottle'.⁹⁴

Ghost Fleet provided a template for some of these concerns. Celebrating traditional American construction and techniques for manufacture, in *Ghost Fleet* only older weaponry remains uncompromised by the incorporation of Chinese micro-chip technology into military appliances that disables the army's hardware at the height of the conflict. Instead,

technological obsolescence becomes an advantage – only the outmoded and redundant navy vessels that do not contain Chinese computer software can be mobilised to resist a Chinese offensive – an echo of fears about the import of Chinese goods undermining American manufacture expressed by a previous generation of populists. The moth-balled ‘Ghost Fleet’ of the novel’s title, invisible to Chinese monitoring devices, is undetectable and able to strike back without revealing its location. Here the book becomes a homily to the traditional American virtues of ‘can do’, artisanal refinement and craftsmanship, traditional mechanical skills, and established companies with long-standing American names. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these skills in producing home-grown goods were a marker and defining line in the craft attributes of US labour, unifying the workplace in populist and labourist rhetoric along the lines of race and whiteness, and enabling the inclusion of ‘old’ European (as opposed to ‘new’ incomer labour like the Chinese) into the community of productive labour united against the itinerant unskilled.⁹⁵ There are also echoes here of the trade in traditional American artefacts and collectible weaponry that appealed to the Japanese masters of the Pacific Seaboard Occupation Zone in Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962): in *Ghost Fleet*, however, traditional US goods and antiquated hardware symbolise resilience, adaptability, and resistance, rather than compliance and defeatism.⁹⁶

Conclusions

In the century prior to the Second World War, speculative stories of foreign invasions and the fall of American power were forms of popular fiction that highlighted a public vision of the central role and position of the United States in global affairs and the dangers to its pre-eminence. Sensation fiction provided a canvas on which the travails of the republic, its triumphs, and the threats to its global role, might be projected.⁹⁷ *Ghost Fleet* carries many of

the tropes that typify the fiction emerging from the conflict between East and West towards the end of the nineteenth century. Although avoiding the openly racist and stereotypical images of the Chinese that traditionally characterise this narrative, trace elements of older aspects of the Chinese menace remain at the heart of the book in the refinement of new techniques of technological and cyber warfare launched by the ruling Directorate in China to disable the military and defensive safeguards of the US. In recent years, anxieties that relate to fears about the emergence of China have been magnified by the country's economic rise, and a public awareness that China remains the only global power economically capable of supplanting the US. Updating many of these views, the novel captures the anxieties behind the strategic thinking underpinning the United States's 'pivot to Asia' and renewed concerns about the transformation of China into the economic and political powerhouse of the Asia Pacific Rim region. Moreover, it magnifies fears about the fragility of the US in a uni-polar world order in which US power is perceived as eroding on the model of the British empire. Carrying many of the traditional tropes of the threat posed by the Asiatic menace, but disavowing issues of race, the novel, nevertheless, updates many of the contemporary fears of the nineteenth century for a new generation.

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Notes

¹ Singh, *After Obama*, 87.

² Ibid., p. 86.

³ For Le Queux, see Bulfin and Wood, "Introduction," 1-16 and on comparisons between *Ghost Fleet* and the works of William Le Queux, Gady, "Can Fiction Predict the Future of Warfare?" 24-27.

⁴ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, frontispiece.

⁵ Ibid., 380. See also Clancy and Bond, *Red Storm Rising*, 1-25; and Conan Doyle, *The Poison Belt*, ch. 1.

⁶ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 130.

⁷ Wells, *The War in the Air*, 7.

⁸ See Bowler, *A History of the Future*, 26; and Ceadel, "Popular Fiction and the Next War, 1918-1939," 161-3.

⁹ Matin, "The Benefit and the Handicap of Hindsight," 218.

¹⁰ Westad and Jian, *The Great Transformation*, chs 1-2.

¹¹ See Stevenson, *Someone's Else's Empire*, 83-122; Khan, *The Struggle for Taiwan*, 165-208; and Hampton, *Hong Kong and British Culture*, 211-18.

¹² Barr, *Who's Afraid of China?* 171-5.

¹³ See Gienow-Hecht, "Always Blame the Americans," 1067-91; Morgan, "The Washington Consensus and Anti-Americanism," 217-38; and on predictions for a Chinese-dominated future, Niblett, *The New Cold War*, ch. 2.

¹⁴ Thompson, "The New Great Game," 30-2.

¹⁵ For historical fears about non-European powers turning the tables on the West, see Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 123.

¹⁶ Matin, "The Benefit and Handicap of Hindsight," 222-3.

¹⁷ Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!*, 67-86; and *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective*, 9, 73-80.

¹⁸ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 3-40.

¹⁹ See Stafford, *The Silent Game*, 213-29; and for the impact of William Le Queux's novels, Bulfin, "The International Circulation and Impact of Invasion Fiction," 159-92.

²⁰ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 31. On Mahan's book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783* (1890), and its impact on Kaiser Wilhelm II in particular, see also Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 237, 396.

²¹ See Stratford, "Ghost Fleet – A Novel of the Next World War", 1-2; and James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste*, 149.

²² Chinchilla, Poast, and Reiter, "Would Americans Go to War Against China?" 142-54.

²³ Updike, *Toward the End of Time*, ch. 1

²⁴ Mullin, *The Friends of Harry Perkins*, 5, 11, 50-1, 81.

²⁵ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 28-33.

²⁶ Tsang and Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*.

²⁷ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹ Singh, *After Obama*, 87.

³⁰ Hutton, *The Writing on the Wall*, 227-28.

³¹ Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 63-96.

³² Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 73-81.

³³ See McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 215-92; and for this phenomenon in the Australian colonies and the Commonwealth of Australia after 1901, Taylor, "Chinese Emigration to Australia," 104-16.

³⁴ See Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers*, 133-5; and Norton, "Our Labor System and the Chinese," 87.

³⁵ See Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, 15-45; and Denoon and Mein-Smith with Wyndham, *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*, 175-6.

³⁶ See Hirson and Vivian, *Strike Across the Empire*, 4-5, 37-42; and Traverso, *Revolution*, 425-6.

³⁷ See "The Yellow Danger," 1; and for the attitudes of the Knights of Labor to Chinese migration, Parfitt, *Knights Across the Atlantic*, 41-2.

³⁸ See Gregory, *The Menace of Colour*, 154; and Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 227-30.

³⁹ See Saunders and McConnell, "The Question of the Day," 45-66; "The Chinese Question," 2; Kazin, "The July Days in San Francisco, 1877," 136-63; and for anti-Chinese demonstrations in Sydney in 1878, "The Riot in Sydney?" 5.

⁴⁰ See Ethington, *The Public City*, 201-5, 263-271; and Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 167-95.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 194-5.

⁴² See London, "The Unparalleled Invasion," 111; and for nativist populism, Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, ch. 1.

⁴³ Orwell, "Predictions," 16.

⁴⁴ Dooner, *The Last Days of the Republic*, 3-4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-50. For Chinese migrants in colonial Australia, see Fitzpatrick, *Big White Lie*, chs. 3 and 7; and Davison, *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, 153.

⁴⁶ See Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 29; and Jacques, "As China's Power Grows, the Diaspora Starts to Flex its Worldwide Muscle," 31.

⁴⁷ Sanders, "The Yellow Perils," 91.

⁴⁸ Holmstrom, "The Chinese," 884.

⁴⁹ "L", "The Future of China," 159-74, 161.

⁵⁰ Pearson, *National Life and Character*, 96.

⁵¹ Briggs, "The 1890s," 164-5.

⁵² Sanders, "The Yellow Perils," 94-5.

⁵³ Like anxieties about German expansionism, treatments of China in popular fiction draw, in their origins, on fears stoked by the populist right-wing press. See Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 107-61; and for anti-Chinese themes on the stage, MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 49-50.

⁵⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 40-1, 58.

⁵⁵ See Frayling, *The Yellow Peril*, ch. 5; and Diamond, *Lesser Breeds*, 36-8.

⁵⁶ Wang, "His Dominion" and the "Yellow Peril," chs, 2-3.

⁵⁷ Diamond, *Lesser Breeds*, 37. The term "Rohmeresque" was coined for a certain type of aggressively anti-Chinese popular fiction in Bickers, *Britain in China*, 24.

⁵⁸ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 269-72.

⁵⁹ Taylor, "'And I am the God of Destruction,'" 73-95.

⁶⁰ For moral panics in the United States about the white slave trade, see Pliley "The FBI's White Slave Division," 221-45.

⁶¹ See Manderson, "'Disease, Defilement, Depravity,'" 22–48; and Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 252–3.

⁶² Chesneaux, *China: The People's Republic*, 225–35.

⁶³ Quoted in Liu, "Bring Me My Tariffs," 6.

⁶⁴ See Heinlein, *Sixth Column*, 37–8; Diamond, *Lesser Breeds*, 14–15; Tchen and Yeats, *Yellow Peril*, 205; and Shiel, *The Yellow Danger*, 1–19.

⁶⁵ London, "The Unparalleled Invasion," 86.

⁶⁶ See for "the crowd", Kerr, *Eastern Figures*, 53–78; and for reform in the Meiji era, depicted as turning the technologies of the West back against the Western powers, Lehrmann, *The Roots of Modern Japan*, 130–59.

⁶⁷ See Webb and Enstice, *Aliens and Savages*, 191–214; and for the origins of this genre, Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure*, 134–54.

⁶⁸ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 57–69.

⁶⁹ Hay, *The Invasion*, 17–18.

⁷⁰ Desser, "'Charlie Don't Surf,'" 81–102.

⁷¹ Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 96. For populism and the decline of the West, see Ely, *Russian Populism*, 70, 96–7.

⁷² See Sanders, "The Yellow Perils," 100; and "Calchap," "Will England Last the Century?" 20-34.

⁷³ "'Back to Barbarism," 17.

⁷⁴ Day, *The Great Betrayal*, 1-17, 344-59.

⁷⁵ Overy, *The Morbid Age*, 9-49.

⁷⁶ See Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 96; and Heinlein, *Sixth Column*, 34.

⁷⁷ See Kratman, 'Afterword' to Heinlein, *Sixth Column*, 247; and Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 98-100.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁹ See Gibson, "'American Paramilitary Culture," 10-42.

⁸⁰ See Singer and Cole, *Ghost Fleet*, 91; and for fears of a Japanese assault on California, Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 293-300.

⁸¹ Davis, *Dead Cities and Other Tales*, 119-25.

⁸² Heinlein, *Sixth Column*, 70.

⁸³ See Gilmore, "Introduction," 10.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 76. For cults in California, see Neima, *The Utopians*, 201-229; and Whisenhunt, *Utopian Movements of the Great Depression*, ch. 2.

⁸⁵ Heinlein, *Sixth Column*, 93-4.

⁸⁶ Woodward, *Fear*, 272.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Jones, *Donald Trump*, 40.

⁸⁸ See Woodward, *Fear*, 4; and for the US populist tradition, Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 36.

⁸⁹ Müller, *What is Populism?* 20-3.

⁹⁰ See Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 185-6; and Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labour and Populists*, 143-9.

⁹¹ Wolf, *Fire and Fury*, 45.

⁹² See Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 197; and Rodden, *Why Cities Lose*, 233.

⁹³ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 128.

⁹⁴ Wolf, *Fire and Fury*, 7-8.

⁹⁵ See Archer, *Why is there no Labor Party in the United States?* 63-70; and Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness*, 87-9.

⁹⁶ Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 51-2.

⁹⁷ Williams, *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War*, 28.