

# THE CULTURAL LOGIC of America's Pivot to the Asia-Pacific

For most of the first decade of post-9/11 era, America devoted the majority of its efforts to combating terrorism and taking large-scale military actions. However, upon Obama's election as the president of the single super power on the globe and with the receding tides of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, America has shifted its focus to the Asia-Pacific from the Middle East, signifying the end of America's first decade of foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

On various occasions, the US policy makers have been expressing their priority in the Asia-Pacific. For instance, '[t]he future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action' (Clinton, 2011). On the practical level, the US commitment to the Asia-Pacific can be observed in the aspects of economy, politics, and security. In an economical aspect, America dominated the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), a high-standard free trade agreement that particularly aims at reshaping strategically the region's economic structure and, thereby, revitalizing and enhancing its leadership. Politically, America has been sending 'the full range of our diplomatic assets', as Clinton calls it, to strengthen its relations with the traditional alliances and engage in regional multilateral institutions like Association of Southeast Asian

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1 In 'Re-orienting America', Richard Haass believes that the second phase of America's foreign policy began with the 9/11 terror attacks and was followed by a decade of counter-terrorism and large-scale military commitment. See <http://www.cfr.org/politics-and-strategy/re-orienting-america/p26490>

Nations (ASEAN) forum. For security, the US has been expanding its military deployment in this region; for example, it deployed marine rotation in Darwin, Australia. It seems to be self-evident that America has accelerated its forceful steps to return to the Asia-Pacific.

However, against the above candid observation, to question whether America had been away from Asia in the past decades is not without sense, particularly given the dominant position America has assumed after the Second World War in Asia. Since 2011, the rhetoric of America's Asia policy has evolved from 'Return to the Asia-Pacific' to 'Rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific' and to 'Pivot to the Asia-Pacific', showing that America has been recalibrating its relationship with the Asia-Pacific. It had not been away but had merely paid less attention to the region in the previous decade.

More importantly, with a firmer sense of history of America's cultural relationship with Asia, one would find that the so-called 'strategic shift' might not alter as much as the historical and cultural heritage continues. The continuity of American imperialism, Orientalism, and various cultural complexes toward the Asia-Pacific deserves more attention than America's impending eastward strategic shift *per se*. This provides us a chance to examine the role that culture plays in the formation of the US Asia policy. As John Carlos Rowe insightfully points out:

There is no 'value' without culture; economic surplus, political power, personal identity, and social affiliation depend upon their deployment through the symbolic network we term 'culture'. Political critique is thus impossible without interpretation of this cultural matrix; analysis remains mere commentary on political particulars until it has taken into account how political practices rely on the rhetorical persuasion of culture. (Rowe, 2012: 20)

Hence, this paper particularly intends to treat the cultural 'pathology' that sheds long-standing effects on America's Asia and global policy. Speaking of the Obama administration's Asia policy, people tend to pay more attention to the verb—'return/rebalance/pivot'—than to the object, Asia-Pacific/Asia. Before discussing the pivot back strategy, the constructive-

ness of the Asia-Pacific as one region has to be acknowledged. With a careful look at 'the Asia-Pacific', one readily notices the hyphen and think of the vast diversity in terms of ethnicity, cultures, history, languages, economic developments, and political systems within this region. There exists the constructiveness of the Asia-Pacific and the arbitrariness of connecting Asia and Pacific as one region.

The constructed-ness of a region, especially the arbitrariness to connect Asia and the Pacific together as one region, has been questioned and scrutinized by several critics. Arif Dirlik has examined the unsettledness and instability of a region that is subject to human activities. Dirlik observes 'a tendency to view the region as a geographical given, a physically delineated stage, as it were, upon which human beings play out their activities' (Dirlik, 1992: 57). He also suggests, 'any definition is at best an abstract representation that seeks to contain within physical categories the spatial and temporal motions of the human activity—including the activity of conceptualization—that constitutes its reality' (58). The construction of the Asia-Pacific as a region accords with those interests of the community of Euro-American social scientists and a group of policy makers. Therefore, a region (center/periphery) is often subject to change, 'as the activity changes that constitutes the region as a region' (58). In a similarly metageographical vein, the Asia-Pacific 'is being constructed into a postcolonial, if not post-national, identity as a coherent region of teleological belonging' and 'such a user-friendly geopolitical signifier' seems essential without which a coherent region through which '*transnationalizing economy*' expanded to Asia cannot exist (Wilson, 2001: 389–390).

John Eperjesi argues that the construction often intertwines with historical conditions and powers. And 'because geographical space does not automatically fit into meaningful units' (Eperjesi, 2005: 3), he further points out the importance of the practice of representation in regard to the existence of a region. Overlooking America's construction and representation of the Asia-Pacific when analyzing Obama administration's Asia policy may evade America's consistently long dominance in the region, not only militarily, economically and politically

but also culturally and ideologically. This oversight not only leads to the failure to grasp and treat the cultural pathology of America's periodically aggressive foreign policy but also results in neglecting to recognize 'imperialism as a [historical] force from within, rather than simply being imposed from without' (Chen, 2007: 112). Therefore, it is necessary to examine America's imagery of the Asia-Pacific, which has played a facilitating role in the strategic shift to the East.

#### AMERICAN PACIFIC AND THE TPP

Among all the practical aspects, the TPP is considered to be an essential part of America's pivot strategy—'a key element of the Obama Administration's strategy to make US engagement in the Asia-Pacific region a top priority'.<sup>2</sup> Initiated by Chile, Singapore, New Zealand, and Brunei during the 10th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, its agreement within APEC architecture from the outset did not draw much attention due to the small size of the four economies combined. Yet it began to balloon since Obama declared America's participation in 2009.

'Expanding US exports to the Asia-Pacific region can contribute significantly to further job growth and economic recovery for America's working families'.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, the TPP is expected to contribute to reaching the goal set by President Obama to double America's export. However, the persistence of the economic and market discourse in American Pacific ideology does not mean that the TPP is merely a framework that America adopts to increase its export and recover its strength from the financial crisis by taking advantage of the economic boom and market potentiality of the Asia-Pacific. In fact, the TPP is far from effective in doubling America's export and increasing job opportunities. It is estimated on the current TPP track that in 2025, apart from Vietnam (25.8%), New Zealand (5%),

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2 White House Fact Sheet, November 12, 2011. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/12/fact-sheet-united-states-trans-pacific-partnership>

3 Office of the US Trade Representative, retrieved from <http://www.ustr.gov/about-us/press-office/fact-sheets/2009/december/economic-opportunities-and-the-TPP>

Korea (7.7%), and Peru (11%), the export increase of other TTP members is less than 5%. Fewer than 30,000 jobs can be created in US from 2015 to 2020.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, the political implications of the TPP outweigh its economic intentions.

US PTAs (with the exception of NAFTA) typically involve trade partners of only minor importance to the American economy, underlining the fact that the central drivers of US PTAs have been foreign policy and security objectives, not commercial considerations. Washington's interest in the TPP is consistent with this general pattern. (Capling and Ravenhill, 2011: 559)

More importantly, even though the post-nationalist feature emerges in the TTP, it does not diminish America's domination in this framework. With the prefix of 'trans', it emphasizes the movements and displacements of capital, labor, goods, ideas, cultures, and so forth. Compared to other regional associations like ASEAN and APEC, the TPP underplays a determined and static region with boundaries and seems more flexible, floating and open with strong dynamics within the framework. In this sense, the TPP is an invention of the boom of transnational and transpacific capitalism. 'Along with the global market and global circuits of production has merged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule—in short, a new form of sovereignty' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xi). This new form composes 'a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule' (xii). The term 'empire', according to Hardt and Negri, differs fundamentally from 'imperialism', which fixes on the boundaries of territories and central authority.

But even though 'the United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xiii, xiv), we should not forget that it is only America with its economic, political, cultural,

4 See Table 8 on page 29 and page 44, (2011) 'The Trans-Pacific Partnership and The Asia-Pacific Integration: A Quantitative Assessment'. *East-West Center Working Papers*, Economic Series, no. 119 [http://www.usitc.gov/research\\_and\\_analysis/documents/petri-plummer-zhai%20EWC%20TPP%20WP%20oct11.pdf](http://www.usitc.gov/research_and_analysis/documents/petri-plummer-zhai%20EWC%20TPP%20WP%20oct11.pdf)

and military power and its global vision and imagery that can assume the privileged seat. 'In its office as a transnational state of exception, the United States exercised the power to decide whether nation-states across the planet had properly integrated within the global economic order or become "failed states"' (Pease, 2011: 11). By renewing or upgrading the old frameworks with new sets of rules 'concerning the United States' relationship to transnational markets and regulatory commissions' (11), America acts as the state of exceptions.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to track and examine the economic dimension of the formation of the Asia-Pacific. America's relation with the Asia-Pacific has been, to a considerably large extent, sustained and problematized by economic ties, particularly by trade; the economic or trade relationships contribute to the formation of the Asia-Pacific as one region ideologically which is geographically unsettled. 'The regional imaginary of the American Pacific was made up of relations of contiguity and hierarchy between places sutured by the trade table' (Eperjesi, 2005: 90). Following the trails of David Harvey<sup>5</sup> and Arif Dirlik<sup>6</sup> on space and geography in general and the Asia-Pacific in particular, Eperjesi argues:

The American Asiatic Association, an important node in the broader political and economic system that pushed the United States in the direction of becoming a regional hegemon, instituted a historically effective set of geographical distortions, an American Pacific Ideology. Such distortions provided the rhetorical origin of real political and economic policies and practices that were structuring the emergent region. (Eperjesi, 2005: 103)

What John Eperjesi emphasizes here is a dialectic relationship between the production of policy at an executive level and the definition/idea or distortions of the region at ideological level. While as much as the former builds up, reshapes, or/and destructs the latter, the latter is operative in the formation

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5 'Spatial barriers can be reduced only through the production of particular spaces' (Eperjesi, 2005: 102).

6 'In a fundamental sense, there is no Pacific region that is an "objective" given, but only a competing set of ideational constructs that project upon a certain location on the globe the imperatives of interest, power, or vision of these historically produced relationships' (Eperjesi, 2005: 102).

of the former. More often than not, the distortions serve to justify the policies. 'The American Pacific does not name a fixed or objective place but rather a bundle of cultural, political, and economic relationships that connect the territorial United States to the areas of Asia and the Pacific' (Eperjesi, 2005: 16). That is to say, American Pacific or what the Asia-Pacific as a recognizable region means to United States is highly contingent on to what extent and in what ways the connections of the United States to Asia and the Pacific as geographical areas are needed in different periods. Just as the saying that the twenty-first century is the Asian/Pacific century that has gained its popularity, Clinton firmly asserts that 'the twenty-first century is still American century' (Clinton, 2011).

The subsequent notion that the twenty-first century is the American Asia-Pacific century singles out the importance of the Asia-Pacific to America's maintaining its privileged status in this century. There comes the necessity for America to 'play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region [the Asia-Pacific] and its future' (Obama, 2011). A subsequent redefinition of the region is therefore needed to fulfill the 'pivot to Asia-Pacific' strategy. The geographical distortions of the region can be readily observed in America's vision of the region's geography. For example, Clinton defines the region as 'stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian—that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy' (Clinton, 2011). The pivot strategy is both predicated upon and constitutive of the American Pacific, which now stretches not only to East Asia but also to South Asia, and not only to the Pacific Ocean but also to the Indian Ocean because of 'the strategic importance of the energy resources and trade that pass through the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca before reaching the manufacturing centers of East Asia' (Manyin, et al., 2012: 5).

Moreover, since the geographical distortions associated with political and economic agendas do not form naturally and automatically into the meaningful entities that serve America's power projection, abstraction as a method of representation becomes a need. Employing language and tropes of co-prosperity

and common community development has become a repeated practice. 'It is tempting to think of the American Pacific as the historical predecessor to more recent constructions of this area under economic slogans such as *the Asia-Pacific* or *Pacific Rim*' (Eperjesi, 2005: 15). In Dirlik's words, 'it [Pacific ideology] serves to disguise as manifestations of regional cooperation and coordination relationships that are also instruments of domination and subordination' (Dirlik, 1992: 57). Rob Wilson argues that 'APEC's vision of "the Asia-Pacific" is culturally and politically naive, ignoring, bypassing or just plain suppressing the cultural complexities and historical issues within the region in order to form this new identity' (Wilson, 2001: 393). This practice continues in John Kerry's 'Remarks on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pacific Partnership' claiming that the goal is 'to translate our strongest values into an unprecedented security, economic, and social cooperation' (Kerry, 2013).

Based upon the above analysis, the TPP can be taken as the continuity of the American Pacific ideology and America's imperialist imagery at large. The geographical distortions and the arbitrary definition that draws a diverse region into one single unity of the Asia-Pacific are common practices of America to serve the justification and implementation of its policy. The policies and executions reinforce American Pacific ideology in return. Furthermore, although the transpacific flows as part of the globalization process greatly undermine the power of the US as one nation-state with fixed boundaries, the privileged status of America allows it to adapt to such changes by making new framework with new rules that best suit the interests of its transnational capitalism and its global agendas.

#### ORIENTALISM RECONFIGURED IN THE PIVOT STRATEGY

Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* is mostly about binary opposition between Europe and the Middle East, the question whether the concept of Orientalism is applicable to the relationship between America and Asia is worth taking into consideration. First of all, the geographical limitation of Orientalism has been challenged. Wang Ning points out that Said's geographical limitation on Orientalism: 'as it is well known, the 'Orient', geographically



speaking, covers at least the wide areas of Asia, Africa, and Australia, but in Said's book, the boundary line stops at the Near East and Middle East' (Wang, 1997: 61). Yet in an interview with Taiwanese scholar, Shan Te-hsing, Said emphasized the 'flexibility' of 'the Orient' and took 'the Middle East' as 'an Orient' of 'the Orient'.<sup>7</sup> Said does recognize that, be it the Middle East or the Far East or the Oceania, they all stand on the opposite side of the Occident, or Euro-America. In regard to American Orientalism, however, Said downplays the role of the imaginative investment and calls the American experience in the Orient 'limited' even though he is aware of Melville's and Twain's writings about the Pacific (Said, 2003: 291).<sup>8</sup> Instead, he highlights the social science in American Orientalism.

Immediately after World War II, then, the Orient became, not a broad Catholic issue as it had been for centuries in Europe, but an administrative one, a matter for policy. Enter the social scientist and the new expert, on whose somewhat narrower shoulders was to fall the mantle of Orientalism. (291)

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In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues:

The relation between America and its Pacific or Far Eastern interlocutors—China, Japan, Korea, Indochina—is informed by racial prejudice, sudden and unprepared rushes of attention followed by enormous pressure applied thousands of miles away, geographically and intellectually distant from the lives of most Americans. (290)

However, with the rising discourse of Pacific Rim and the Pacific community, the American counterparts such as Japan, China, and the newly industrialized countries are no longer geographically and intellectually far away. The Pacific Rim discourse grants

7 See 《薩依德在台灣》台北：允晨文化實業股份有限公司Zai Taiwan, 2011: 252.

8 For instance, 'Said's rhetorical qualifications cause the reader to hesitate as well, so that the fiction of Melville's "Americanness" is effectively replaced by what Said concludes are the inherently transnational qualities of *Moby-Dick*' (See Rowe, 2012: 33). In *Reflection on Exiles and Other Essays*, Said writes, '[t]he tremendous energies of this magnificent story of hunting the White Whale spill over national, aesthetic, and historical boundaries with massive force'.

'an interpenetrating complex of interrelationships with no center' and therefore is a non-othering discourse (Connery, 1994: 32). But this does not mean that we have entered into a post-Orientalist era. On the contrary, Orientalism has become more underlying and less evident under the cover of globalization and transnational economy.

America's pivot to the Asia-Pacific is inextricable from Orientalism that prevails the America's diplomatic and strategic culture manifested through its rhetorical expressions and justifications of its policies. Compared to its influence on American foreign policy, Orientalism indeed has received very little attention from the history of American diplomacy. Such a lack of reciprocity is due to various factors that can be summarized into several criticisms of *Orientalism* on the part of diplomacy historians.

Firstly, '*Orientalism* is a sprawling book' (Rotter, 2000: 1207). By 'sprawling', Rotter means that it covers two centuries and three nations in a brief book. The book could be very simplistic. Secondly, the book lacks 'basis in sustained historical research' and the equation of fiction and works of history is at odds with tenets of historian training (1208). Thirdly, Said has a 'dubious epistemological relationship to matters of cause and effect' (1208). That is to say, linearity of history no longer exists in Said *Orientalism* and yet, 'for better or worse, most historians still believe that they are engaged in a search for reasons why things happened as they did' (1208). Last but not the least, Said's power discourse of knowledge and his subversion of the idea that Oriental is constructed are problematic to diplomacy historians because they lead to the danger of nihilism. However, on the other hand, Rotter finds himself attracted to Said's theory in the way that 'by political inclination, by admiration for a powerful and interesting mind, and by a sense that Said is speaking for people whose voices foreign relations specialists have never fully articulated' (1207).

More importantly, the absence of Orientalism in the history of American diplomacy does not mean that it is absent in America's diplomatic and strategic culture. '[Said] has had some influence on the field [...] there exist opportunities to employ his insights further' (Rotter, 2000: 1213). Rowe has recently argued that

Said's legacy to new American studies ought to be approached 'as his elaboration of key ideas for our understanding of the US as a global power deeply involved in the politics of the Middle East' (Rowe, 2012: 43, 44). Yet the flexibility of Orientalism in terms of geographical limitations and the long-standing American Pacific imagery behind invites scholars' attention to American Orientalism in US policies toward the Asia-Pacific.

Under no circumstances am I suggesting that a causal relationship exists between Orientalism and the Obama administration's foreign policies toward the Asia-Pacific. Merely applying postcolonial terminologies to America's Asia policy is in no way beneficial to the sophisticated understandings of America's relationship with Asia. Rather, Orientalism serves more as a cultural space in which 'pivot to the Asia-Pacific' is shaped and articulated. If American Orientalism does shadow the US Asia policies as it does in the Middle East, what forms or consistency does the latent Orientalism take on?

First of all, America's pivot/rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific correlates with Said's definition of Orientalism as the Occident's dealing of Orient 'by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it' (Said, 2003: 4). Such a claim can be argued against as too bold and hasty, yet to overlook American Orientalism that is potentially operative in its strategic culture and Asia policy may be unsafe. After all, having remained a dominant power in the Asia-Pacific after the World War II as well as constructing/reconstructing the region over and over again, America's vision toward Asia and the Pacific is a leader/subordinate type, which in its essence is comparable to the master/slave type formed in the British Empire and its colonies—a binary opposition.

Take the prophetic rhetoric in Hillary Clinton's 'America's Pacific Century' as an example. This declaration of America's return to the Asia-Pacific is a manifestation of America's hegemonic view as well as the ghost of Orientalism. For Hillary Clinton, it seems that Asian countries are still not able to ensure their own security and stability in this Post-Cold War world, and to a considerable extent, the Asia-Pacific is constantly in the need of and has always been taking advantage of America's 'care':

Asia's remarkable economic growth over the past decade and its potential for continued growth in the future depend on the security and stability that has long been guaranteed by the US military, including more than 50,000 American servicemen and servicewomen serving in Japan and South Korea. The challenges of today's rapidly changing region—from territorial and maritime disputes to new threats to freedom of navigation to the heightened impact of natural disasters—require that the United States pursue a more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable force posture. (Clinton, 2011)

Since the nations/region are not able to govern themselves, the altruistic Euro-American interventions in the forms of help and care have always been in need. There are always problems that await America to solve there.

The region is eager for our leadership and our business—perhaps more so than at any time in modern history. We are the only power with a network of strong alliances in the region, no territorial ambitions, and a long record of providing for the common good. ... I hear everywhere I go that the world still looks to the United States for leadership. (Clinton, 2011)

In doing so, America's interests in the regions can also be maintained. Robert Lieber draws the conclusion that 'for the immediate future, America's role in Asia clearly satisfies the twin criteria of regional stability and national interest' (Lieber, 2005: 175). Similarly, Hugh White also attributes the rise of Asia to America's suppressing conflicts and concludes that 'Asia's success today therefore ranks among the great achievements of the American Century' (White, 2012: 15). However, none of them have noticed that this double criteria—regional stability and national interest—are indeed satisfied at the sacrifice of the local people. For example, one of the most formal bilateral military ties between America and South Korea has been established in the name of maintaining the security of the Korean peninsula and northeast Asia. But in the newly militarized Jeju, 'protesters are concerned about the cultural and environmental impacts of the base and it is estimated that as much as 90% of the people of Gangjeong, the village in the southern part of Jeju where the base is being constructed, are currently in opposition' (Eperjesi, 2011). The traumatized areas in Korean War and the Cold War era have constantly or periodically been

suffering from America's military presence in the name of security. 'Leading local activists in the anti-base movement have been arrested while peace activists from all over the world have begun to lend their support, most notably feminist writer Gloria Steinem' (Eperjesi, 2011). Obviously, there are voices from the local stifled and unanswered. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said starts his discussion on 'Knowing the Oriental' with Balfour's speech, 'The Problem with which We Have to Deal in Egypt'.

It does not occur to Balfour, however, to let the Egyptian speak for himself, since presumably any Egyptian who would speak out is more likely to be 'the agitator [who] wishes to raise difficulties' than the good native who overlooks the 'difficulties' of foreign domination. (Said, 2003: 34)

The eulogy of America's military presence in Asia is, in its essence, no different from Balfour's justification of the British presence in Egypt. Jeju is not alone; Okinawa, Darwin, and Changi, among so many, all fall into victims in various ways such as landscape, environmental and cultural destruction, forced migration, or American troops' undisciplined behaviors. Yet such logic of the Orientalism trope held by American politicians disguises the (neo)imperialist ambitions and justifies America's aggressive engagement in Asia and the Pacific. What is even worse is that, due to the Cold War paranoia of red revolution, Cold War Orientalism has been achieving consensus from the local governments in Asia and the Pacific without undermining nation's sovereignty as it did in the colonial era. The American alliance today, chiefly the military connection, is reinforced again and again by governments such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia at the sacrifice of the local citizens.

Secondly, the construction and constant reshaping of the Asia-Pacific as one region from which America takes its geo-political advantage to be a part of the region, is always accomplished in the practice of Orientalism in the form of uniting the region with common beliefs, dreams, tropes, and slogans as a disguise of domination. 'The exercise of political, economic, and military power always depends upon the mechanisms of "culture" in the form of the creative use of language and the deployment of shared stories' (Klein, 2003: 6). The Pacific Dream,

recently championed and articulated by US leaders like John Kerry, and the TPP, a partnership advanced by America that is far beyond a trade framework, both function as co-prosperity tropes that justify the benefits of America's engagement in Asia and the Pacific. When delivering the speech to Tokyo, John Kerry said:

We have a duty to look ahead and define a path toward progress in the Asia-Pacific. And that means making the most of this opportunity. Now you have all heard, I know—and I say this without presumption that we're proud of it—you've all heard of the American Dream. It is embodied by no one more than by Barack Obama. Now Beijing's new leader has introduced what he calls a 'China Dream'. Today I'd like to speak with you about our opportunity in this increasingly global age to design and define our dream for the Pacific region, one in which nations and people forge a partnership that shapes our shared future [...] I feel the same way about our shared principles and values, which bring us closer, closer together than we often imagine. (Kerry, 2013)

The Pacific Dream is no more than a cliché about the universal values that ought to be shared by everyone in every nation, a speech constituting a myth and fantasy which assists and justifies integrations of transnational capitalism and America's transpacific engagement and which drains away the lively injustice and unfairness partly as results of transnational capitalism and globalization. The Pacific dream, like the American dream or the Chinese dream, does purify things and make them seem innocent. But localizing such a Pacific dream will allow us to see through this mythology of partnership and co-prosperity. Take Foxconn, the Taiwanese multinational manufacturing corporation, as an example. The consistent ailing suicides of its staff in recent years in mainland China have been attributed to the pressure of enduring overwork and repeating one type of tedious operation thousands of times a day, all leading to the alienation of human beings. Of course, the absence of labor unions and the failed labor law enforcements should be blamed. However, being one of the largest OMEs of Apple, Kindle, and PlayStation, the tragedy of Foxconn in the mainland is connected with the greedy, profit-oriented transnational capitalism. One employee of Foxconn's working plant in Xinzheng, Henan province, Li Xiang, mentioned

in an interview that he had touched as many iPhones as a two-level building if piled up, but the money he made could not afford him the bricks to build one house.<sup>9</sup> In short, as scholars and critics, we must remain alert to any dream or myth design that distorts the reality, remain critical to any regional unification, and always localize and contextualize such a myth in order to destruct it.

A third question concerning America's pivot/rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific in terms of Orientalism has to do with its complacency or more accurately, its sublimity of new technologies and its 'smart power'. Despite the suspicion of America's capability in implementing its strategic turn haunting around, such as its fiscal constraints and its diverting attention to other parts of world, America seems to be fully confident that 'it is all in' the Asia-Pacific. Such confidence has been built up in the long process of the construction of the American sublime that provides the rhetorical origins of America's Asia policies.

The American sublime is critically outlined in Rob Wilson's fine essay, 'Techno-Euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', in which Wilson traces back to the sublime American landscape that was formed in the expansionist decades of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century. Wilson refigures this landscape as the contemporary American technological sublimity in a postmodern era. By reading George Bush's Patriot missiles speech during the Gulf War as 'uncanny cultural symbols of power activating a residual language of the American political unconscious', Wilson uncovers:

High technology, not nature, was used to instigate the will to global superiority at a moment when transnational reconfiguration and domestic stagnation had left many citizens wondering not only where nature had gone as a ground of value but also what was so superior about American technology or even the American economy itself.

This sense of technological superiority, ratifying a deeper cultural and moral conviction of political exceptionality at work, underwrites the grander claim of American hegemony that was

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9 Arthur James Balfour served as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1902 to 1905 and Foreign Secretary from 1916–1919.

ultimately propagated through this war in the Persian Gulf that ‘civilized behavior can begin again’ (Wilson, 1992: 219–221).

Wilson did not touch on Orientalism here, but since ‘the Patriot missile functioned, beyond its military performance, as a symptom of American desire to install the sublime of its own geopolitical project in global redemption’ (Wilson, 1992: 226), American techno-sublime instigates the revival of Orientalism as we see others not as they are, but as we are. As Said wrote, ‘Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world’ (Said, 2003: 12).

How America sees itself or in its cognitive mapping of itself to the world has been imbued by a strong sublimity and registers confidence or overconfidence. The exaltation of Patriot missile by George Bush in the Gulf War registers a techno-sublime that puts its power projection as a form of global redemption, and such a techno-sublime has been reinforced through two wars America fought in the new century. ‘The most high-profile and concrete elements of the Administration’s announced “rebalancing” toward the Asia-Pacific have come in the military realm’ (Manyin, et al., 2012: 10). Obama has publicly said that ‘reductions in US defense spending will—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific’ (Obama, 2011). The coming deployment of Sea-Based X-Band Radar in Japan and Southeast Asia as a new and advanced part of US anti-missile defense system in Asia; the proliferated use of drones such like the Global Hawks that keep every corner in the world under its surveillance; and advanced aircraft carriers, various types of combat planes, warships, nuclear powered submarines all symbolize the American techno-sublime and provide the base of the confident rhetoric that America is bound to lead by resorting to high technology. As Clinton says:

Our military is by far the strongest, and our economy is by far the largest in the world. Our workers are the most productive. Our universities are renowned the world over. So there should be no doubt that America has the capacity to secure and sustain our global leadership in this century as we did in the last. (Clinton, 2011)



To summarize, America's pivot/rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific does not go beyond the model of Orientalism, since it is both a distortion and construction of an inferior other or others that wait for the US to be there and assume a leadership role. In a postnational, postmodern, and late capitalist era, Orientalism still lingers. There are those resistance voices that need to be heard, the myth that needs to be destructed, and the binary opposition—superiority/inferiority, leader/subordinate—that needs to be interrogated.

#### AMERICA'S CHINA-LITERACY AS SELF-IMAGINATION

Although under various circumstances US policy makers have expressed that the pivot/rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific is not aimed to contain China, there are concerns from China and observations abroad that the current US Asia policy intends to isolate and contain the rising power. Responding to Panetta's denial of the fact that the pivot is targeting at China, Richard Armitage, former US Deputy Secretary of State said, '[w]hen the administration says it's not about China, it's *all* about China. China knows this'.<sup>10</sup> The first Australian ambassador to the People's Republic of China, Stephen Fitzgerald, says that 'the decision to "pivot" Australia into the re-invigorated US military alliance strategy in the Pacific was a decision about China, not just about America' (Fitzgerald, 2013: 46). Indeed the political rhetoric is one thing while how such policy is executed is another.

Moreover, how China responds to this pivot strategy matters. 'The media and some Asian observers chose to see all these steps as part of a blueprint for American containment, constraining, or a pushback against rising China' (Lieberthal, 2012: 3). Lieberthal considers such a containment rhetoric as 'wrong' but 'powerful'. It is so powerful that it provokes China to consolidate its domestic power by appeasing to hardliners, instigating the nationalism and stepping up with more assertive diplomatic measures. In his summary, Lieberthal emphasizes the necessity to 'manage the rhetoric and actions behind this strategy' (11).

<sup>10</sup> See [http://news.ifeng.com/society/2/detail\\_2013\\_11/03/30911891\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/society/2/detail_2013_11/03/30911891_0.shtml)

Surely whether America's pivot/rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific is targeting China or not is debatable both in theory and in practice. But what I am concerned with here is the rhetoric of containment itself and China's reception of and responses to such a discourse.

The discourse of containment has a great deal to do with the perennial China threat literature in America's China literacy, whereas China's reception and response is be associated with China's American literacy biased by the nationalist inclination and the Cold War burdens on both intellectual and public levels.

'The policy one country adopts towards another can affect its perceptions but the converse is also true, in other words that images can influence policy' (Mackerras, 2013: 1). Pan further links the theory and idea with practice and foreign policy by arguing that China threat as a paradigm, not only justifying U.S. policies but also prescribing them. It is widely held that the rise of China is one vital factor driving America's pivot/rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific. In the congressional report drafted by seven specialists of Asian affairs entitled 'Pivot to the Pacific? Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia', China accounts for such a large part of the report that subtitles related to China appear in every section of this report.<sup>11</sup> According to the authors of the report, 'for many observers, it is thus only prudent that the United States gives more emphasis to the Asia-Pacific. A failure to do so could invite other regional powers, particularly China, to the region in ways that are not necessarily in US interests' (Manyin, et al., 2012: 7). The China threat discourse easily finds its usage in justifying America's pivot to Asia. The assertiveness in China's claiming its sovereignty and endeavoring to solve disputes with its neighbors under the principle of 'shelving differences and seeking joint development' is amplified and distorted to the point that China is seeking regional or even global hegemony, so much so that America has a good excuse to project its power to Asia as a pacifier, balancer, or a protector to its alliance.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted directly from Justin Logan's 'America's Pivot: One Big Contradiction', January 25, 2013. <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/25/contradictions-at-the-heart-of-the-pivot/>

Thus, Hillary Clinton could say that 'the region is eager for our leadership' and 'I hear everywhere I go that the world still looks to the United States for leadership'. It not only justifies America's pivot to Asia but also prescribes the practice. It would be naive to say that the rotation of US marines in Darwin, the deployment of Sea-based X-band radar in Japan, and the expansion of partnership with India, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Vietnam apart from traditional alliances are not driven by the China threat paradigm behind. Tracing back to history, it is noticeable that America has been constantly in need of enemies from the former Soviet Union to terrorism so that its military-industrial complex can be satisfied and fulfilled. Otherwise, 'the high-level military spending would be difficult to justify' (Pan, 2012: 85).

Predicated upon Said's Orientalism, Pan deconstructs the China threat paradigm, an important part of western representations of 'China reality' and reveals that the China threat is more of the Euro-American self-imagination than about China itself, corresponding to that Orientalism has less to do with the Oriental than with Occidental. "'The China threat" bears the stamp of Western fears' (Pan, 2012: 44). 'Taking global hegemony in general and dominance in Asia in particular as part and parcel of American self-identity, one would "naturally" treat China's regional influence as a threat' (45). The decade of relative ignorance of the Asia-Pacific by America due to its engagement with anti-terrorism in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars and China's rising economic and political influence plus its military modernization certainly make the US feel unsafe about its status. The US has needed to reclaim its leadership by demonstrating that it is not in decline through a package of comprehensive policies, under which the China threat is a strong prop. A much deeper reason why America is seeking its enemy can be explained by the fact that the formation and sustenance of one's identity relies upon its imagination of its opponent.

While I cannot deny the fact that China is a growing power with increasing military budget and provocative foreign policies in recent years, I deem that the China threat is more of America's self-imagination than about the China's reality itself. Obama's administration has appropriated the rise of China as an effective

way to pivot to Asia. As I have observed, America's China literacy has not only been distorted by its self-imagination but also limited by the over-reliance on the cold numbers and figures, such as the size of gross domestic product (GDP) and military budget of western China observers. This corresponds to what Edward Said refers to as reliance on social science rather than imagination after World War II. For example, Hugh White's newly published book *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* is predicated upon the causal relation between China's rise and China's rivalry with the US in the Asia-Pacific. As White argues, China challenges America's role in the world in a way fundamentally different:

China raises these questions because, in one fundamental way, it is different from any country America has ever dealt with: it is richer and more powerful. Within a few years China is set to have larger economy than America, becoming the first country to do so since America overtook Britain in the 1880s. (White, 2012: 3)

Experts or observers of China in international relations like to focus on statistics, yet this can be superficial. For one thing, those seemingly indifferent figures, like the size of GDP, the military budgets, trade favorable balance, and foreign exchange reserve may support their argument that China is rising in an unprecedentedly fast pace in the world. But being selective in the use of figures, they may deliberately or unconsciously ignore some other figures that offset those positive figures, like the GDP per person, the productive rate of each Chinese worker, or the education level of its citizens. The scholars' selectiveness may be attributed to their self-fulfilling China threat theory 'especially insofar as "area studies" have had close relations with state sponsorship, both intellectual and economic, since their beginning' (Rowe, 2012: 84). Such a selectiveness may also lead the ignorance of the diversity in terms of opinions on almost every issue within Mainland China; China is no longer a nation in which opinions can be censured into a single one, even though the Communist government may have been trying hard to enforce this.

Scholars in social science tend to ignore or give less attention to knowledge in humanity, particularly in what one calls

meta-observations, or the observation of observations. Apart from China's GDP size and growth or military budget, the rich cultural textures, the historical burden of being occupied and invaded for over a century, the social discontent aroused by the large income gap, the environmental problems, the new immigration wave abroad, and other aspects have to be considered when trying to conclude that China is rising and that its rise will lead to hegemony or rivalry with America. Unfortunately, for so many years, China observers in the West, especially in America, who uphold the China threat theory have been dwelling upon the hard and cold facts of social science mainly in the aspects of economy and imprisoning themselves within the imagination without making much progress. Being detached from the Chinese reality, they can hardly reach sound conclusions about China but only those conclusions that support the China threat prophecy.

Based upon the above analysis, the Obama administration's pivot to Asia is not something new or unprecedented but rather a projection of the mixture of its tradition of imperialism and leftover American Orientalism against the backdrop of global capitalization and the contingent rise of Asia, especially China. By critically examining the cultural logic behind America's periodical engagement in Asia, we might find that America's Asia policy is more about itself than about Asia. As Americanists, we need to have a healthy skepticism toward America's high-profile engagement in Asia. I will draw a temporarily optimistic conclusion here by referring to what Edward Said comments on the aftermath of *Orientalism*,

I shall conclude briefly by saying that although the animosities and inequities still exist from which my interest in Orientalism as a cultural and political phenomenon began, there is now at least a general acceptance that these represent not an eternal order but a historical experience whose end, or at least partial abatement, may be at hand. Looking back at it from the distance afforded by fifteen eventful years and the availability of a massive new interpretive and scholarly enterprise to reduce the effects of imperialist shackles on thought and human relations, *Orientalism* at least had the merit of enlisting itself openly in the struggle, which continues of course in 'West' and 'East' together. (Said, 1993: 354)

That said, as new Americanists, we break the boundaries among disciplines as well as those among nations in American studies, endeavoring to end the historical experience, or at least, abase its influence by discovering, analyzing and critiquing it in an ongoing way.

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