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Republican China

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[Republican China](#)

January 24, 2012 in [China Around the World](#) by [kmerkelhess](#)

By Kate Merkel-Hess

Several years ago, I gave a talk on my research to a community group. My first slide included the words “Republican China” and as I waited to begin I heard a woman in the front row lean over and whisper to her neighbor, “I had no idea they have Republicans in China too!”

At this time of bruising primary battles, though, the China that the Republicans have seems more relevant—as China, imagined and real, has played a recurring role in the raucous Republican primaries. Here’s a rundown of some of the ways China has popped up on the campaign trail in recent months:

The Manchurian Candidate

He’s out of the race now, but few China buffs are unaware of the Huntsman-China connection and the many jabs and jokes it spawned. The most infamous is the video created by a group of Ron Paul supporters that intercuts clips of Jon Huntsman speaking Chinese with nasty rhetorical questions about his patriotism and the parentage of his adopted daughters.

Huntsman, who learned to speak Chinese on his Mormon mission in Taiwan and is the former US ambassador to China, was widely panned for speaking Mandarin in the January 7th Republican debate. In an appearance on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe,” former RNC chair Michael Steele said “I thought he was ordering takeout.” Jon Stewart mocked Huntsman and the racist backlash in this clip from the *Daily Show* (jump to 5:00; and be forewarned: the pronunciation you are about to hear is painful in the extreme).

Meanwhile, “[The Relevant Organs](#)” on Twitter (a feed that pretends to be an official PRC mouthpiece) tweeted:



**We admit we're no experts at
democracy, but we swear we did
not program Comrade Huntsman
to believe that 3rd place equals
winning.**

Huntsman, already old news after last week’s withdrawal from the race, is not the only candidate who opponents have attempted to discredit by tying him closely to China. In the final days before the South Carolina primary, one of Romney’s Super PACs set up robocalls that [accused Gingrich](#) of supporting funding that, via the UN, paid for “China’s brutal one-child policy.”

China Policy

China has more often been bogeyman than policy debate subject for the Republican candidates, but even in regards to the latter, the China “policies” that have been floated center on well-worn debates over trade and currency, as when [Bloomberg reported](#) that Mitt Romney

already knows what he would do on his first day in the Oval Office: crack down on Chinese “cheating” on trade. Romney vows to designate China a “currency manipulator” and impose duties on its imports if the yuan isn’t allowed to float freely.

Even while locals noted that, “We can’t be protectionist; look at who our biggest employers are.”

China came up in the last South Carolina debate as well, when CNN moderator John King asked Rick Santorum how he would [bring Apple Computer jobs back](#) (from China) to the US. Santorum’s answer focused on cutting taxes at home. Santorum’s anodyne answer contrasts with economic saber-rattling in debates last fall, as when [Santorum declared](#), “I want to beat China. I want to go to war with China and make America the most attractive place in the world to do business.”

In contrast, Ron Paul has insisted that “we can’t go looking for scapegoats, we can’t blame China” for economic problems at home, noting that China is increasing its influence through investment in other countries, while, he argues, the US has downgraded its influence through foreign military intervention—one of his major campaign themes (jump to 3:20).

China as Analogy

Beyond China realities and policies is China as analogy—what the US could become, given x or y. For instance, this video (also created by Ron Paul supporters, not the campaign) uses an excerpt in which Paul likens American occupation of foreign countries to an imagined Chinese occupation of Texas in order to drive home his views on the provocative nature of American presence abroad.

Meanwhile, [Niall Ferguson](#) has called Romney the “technocrat candidate,” drawing comparisons to Chinese political leaders: “These days, the world headquarters of technocracy is arguably in Beijing, where China’s leadership is chosen through a wholly opaque process of inter-apparatchik machination.”

China policy is unlikely to be a deciding issue in this fall’s election, as the state of the economy and other domestic issues loom large. But if the Republican primary soundbites demonstrate anything more broadly, it is that China—whether as real policy or as recognizable stand-in for autocracy, threat, or other civic depredations—is part of America’s political shorthand.