



*Committee of 100*

To: Interested Parties  
From: Committee of 100  
Re: Language and the U.S.-China Relationship

February 2023

---

---

## **TOPLINE**

The language that lawmakers, public officials, and opinion leaders use to describe their work is as important as the content of their message. Vocabulary and tone can either contradict or verify intentions, goals, and motives. This is especially true in diplomatic and international issues, particularly in discussions about the relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This memo explains the important distinctions between references to China and the Chinese people, the PRC, and the Communist Party of China (CCP). It outlines specific categories of language that are dangerous, problematic, or unproductive, including examples of these categories. It also explains how historical context embedded in messaging can affect perception or receptivity. It is intended to provide a framework for assessing the language that officials and their staff use in public communications.

## **DESCRIBING WORK WITH CHINA & PEOPLE OF CHINESE DESCENT**

It is essential to differentiate between actions taken by the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Communist Party of China (CCP), and the historical, cultural, and geographic region of China and people of Chinese descent. Language should also recognize the difference between citizens of the PRC and individuals of Chinese heritage.

**China:** China refers to the historic geographic region with thousands of continuous years of history and influence beyond its current geographic region, for example in food, culture, language, and technology.

**PRC:** The People's Republic of China refers to the country as a governing entity since 1949 and the current political and geographical borders.

*It is understandable that China is used interchangeably with PRC, but when referring to specific policies of the PRC, it is more appropriate to use the term "PRC" rather than China.*

*In the U.S., we make a distinction between the platforms of the political parties, the policies of the current government/administration, and America as both a cultural and geopolitical entity. A similar analog applies to the CCP, the PRC, and China.*

**Chinese:** An adjective used to describe a person, item, food, or tradition of Chinese origin, not necessarily associated with the PRC.

### **HISTORY & CULTURE CONTEXT**

The People's Republic of China has existed in its current form since 1949, but its culture and civilization date back more than 5,000 years. Chinese civilization, under various forms of government, gave birth to the concept of paper money and advances in human communication like the compass and the printing press, predating Gutenberg by hundreds of years. In the 1820s, China's GDP was over one-third of world GDP and almost 40 times that of the U.S. After the opium wars, the Taiping Rebellion, and inward facing policies, China's position changed. Individuals of Chinese descent, including citizens of the PRC and Chinese Americans, see this history as their cultural heritage. Communication and negotiation are more effective if they reference China's historical context, especially in comparison with the relatively new United States.

**Rising Power:** Describing China as a "rising" power rather than a "resurgent" power ignores the full span of history and demonstrates a lack of understanding of historical context.

**Ignoring Current Cultural Ties:** Despite the evident political differences, US-China cultural exchange is apparent dating back hundreds of years and in the adaption of American culture by a wide swath of Chinese youth and the influence of Chinese cuisine and cultural elements in the US.

### **CATEGORIES OF PROBLEMATIC LANGUAGE**

While word use evolves over time, the offensive nature of many descriptions stems from lingering racist attitudes and the perpetual foreigner stereotype targeted at individuals of Chinese descent. One document cannot provide a comprehensive list of problematic word use. Instead, this memo outlines common categories of problematic language so that speakers and writers can identify the vocabulary that is likely to exaggerate and mislead and may unintentionally encourage prejudice against Chinese and other Asian Americans.

These categories include:

- **War/Violence:** Language that evokes images of war or uses violent metaphors.
- **Illegal Activity:** Language that uses criminal acts as metaphors for the actions of a government.
- **Motivation:** Language that assigns motivation to another individual's or country's actions.
- **Cold War/Ideology:** Language that refers to political ideology from the Cold War.
- **Exaggerations:** Language that characterizes a country, its government, or its people in exaggerated or extremist ways.
- **Sweeping Generalizations:** Language that generalize and characterize an entire nation of people based on a few individual cases or particular actions of the government.

- **Yellow Peril & Model Minority:** Language that villainizes Chinese and Asian Americans and others as existential threats to a people or civilization and are legacies of a long history of ignorance and prejudice.

### **War/Violence:**

Vocabulary evocative of war and violence unnecessarily escalates tensions. Attributions of such combative qualities to a government or its people preclude more constructive dialogue about the specific actions a politician or official might find problematic. By applying such metaphors, politicians also constrain outlooks on international relations, narrow possible diplomatic pathways, and distract from more specific issues. Use of this language indirectly promotes a negative and threatening depiction of people of Chinese descent and, in turn, encourages discrimination and anti-Asian hate.

Politicians, officials, and diplomats would do better to speak directly to avoid careless metaphors and unnecessary escalation.

Examples of inappropriate use:

- The fierce people of China negotiate hard. When they work with you, they want to cut you apart and rip your throat out.
- This issue is a rope the Chinese are going to use to hang us all.
- The PRC has weaponized our priorities against us.

### **Illegal Activity**

Attributing character traits to the people or culture when accusing another government of blanket illegal activity, either metaphorically or literally, personifies a government, escalates a situation, and distracts from real issues. This inflammatory language can also reverberate domestically by painting individuals who share that heritage in a similarly negative and threatening light.

Examples of inappropriate use:

- No one is surprised that China was caught cheating at the World Championships. The Chinese way is to lie, cheat, and steal.
- First the Chinese will steal your job, then they'll hold you hostage for the widgets they made.

### **Motivation**

Language that assigns malign motivation to another government's actions unfairly assumes intention that is often unclear or even impossible to know. Such language causes misunderstanding and may promote undue bias and unnecessary suspicion.

Examples:

- The Chinese government purposefully hid the disease, even from its own people, so they could send it around the world. That's how little regard they have for human life.

- The Chinese Communist Party and other malign actors have infiltrated the United Nations in pursuit of their own goals.

### **Cold War/Ideology**

Ideological language suggests inevitable and irreparable divisions. It elevates a disagreement over a specific action into a blanket conflict that cannot be resolved more diplomatically. By reframing differences with another country as evidence of an existential threat, this language removes the possibility of more constructive paths of action and prevents international cooperation on global issues.

This type of rhetoric harkens back to the language surrounding ideological and irreconcilable differences prevalent during the Cold War. It has recently resurfaced in the context of U.S.-China relations; politicians have embraced this language as a unifying tactic. But this tactic distracts from the real differences and encourages reckless and extreme action. It is particularly dangerous in its ability to escalate disagreement into “cold war” and “cold war” into an actual military conflict.

Domestically, this fearmongering rhetoric encourages anti-Asian hate and suspicion by supporting the perpetual foreigner and yellow peril stereotypes (see below).

Examples:

- Predatory, imperial powers like China will hold countries in Latin America and Africa hostage without strong international institutions to protect their sovereignty against a country that seeks only to benefit its own power.
- Imperialist, authoritarian China will do anything it can to bend the global economy to its own will and make the world adopt their Communist way of life.

### **Exaggerations**

Exaggerations rarely capture the full breadth of an issue. By leaping to the extreme, they ignore nuance and prevent constructive discussion. When policymakers use such hyperbolic speech, they may escalate an issue or undermine their own credibility and understanding of that issue. This language encourages audiences to jump to unfair and inaccurate conclusions that may lead to discriminatory actions and behavior.

Example:

- China threatens everything about the American way of life.

### **Sweeping Generalizations**

Overly broad generalizations unfairly stereotype an entire race or nationality. While they can help the public understand a complex situation, they also hinder more detailed understanding. Generalizations applied to China may also be used against Asian Americans and can promote discrimination, prejudice, or even violence.

Example:

- The Chinese people are fierce and untrustworthy.

### **Yellow Peril & Model Minority**

The yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes villainize Asian Americans and exclude them from the American identity. These concepts, deeply embedded in American history and experience, have served as fearmongering tactics to frame Chinese and Asian Americans as threatening outsiders. The model minority stereotypes paint Asian Americans as capable technocrats but not good leaders. In recent years, people have used yellow peril language to blame Asian Americans for introducing and spreading disease. Such language has alienated Asian Americans and perpetuated anti-Asian hate.

Examples:

- The Kung Flu virus started in China –at the wet market where they sell dogs for stir-fry.
- The Chinese officials always come prepared to the meetings, but they sure lack personality.

### **CONTACT**

For questions about this document, please email Committee of 100 Director of Public Policy Elizabeth Kerr at [ekerr@committee100.org](mailto:ekerr@committee100.org).