

Research Reports

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China's Strategic Culture Hypothesis: Pursuing the Mystery of a Unique Idea

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Xi Jinping: "The Chinese people don't have the gene for invasion and hegemony in their blood." ¹

Introduction

This is part of a speech Xi Jinping gave to a large group of foreigners on May 15, 2014. Dignitaries and intellectuals in the People's Republic of China (hereafter referred to as "China") often engage in self-righteous discourse unabashedly. When Li Jijun and Yu Qifen, who have discussed strategic culture in China, talk about Chinese strategic theory, they invariably emphasize the peaceful aspects of Chinese civilization.² Simply explaining China's words and deeds using historical or strategic theory alone may not be enough to understand them. Therefore, this paper will borrow from "strategic culture theory" to take a closer look at the Chinese conception of security.

Originally, strategic culture theory had its origins in Jack L. Snyder's questioning of nuclear strategy theory, which was built on the assumption that the Soviet Union was a "rational actor". Behind the focus on China's strategic culture is the practical needs that China's growing influence has made the interpretation of its black box foreign perceptions and actions more important.

In interpreting China's strategy and words and deeds, it is worth trying to understand its major cultural tendencies and, from there, determining how to offer explanations for Chinese perceptions and behavior. This paper offers discussions on how to deal with traditional Chinese culture and foreign cultural influences – especially the strategic culture of the Communist Party – and to what extent the "one-sided" evaluations and judgments that China makes about its own and other countries' behavior can be explained by strategic culture theory.

1. The Legalist and Confucian Traditions

What forms the strategic culture of China are the memories of the wars and reigns that have occurred in its civilization throughout history and the lessons learned from them. According to Shu Guang Zhang, China's ruling dynasties from the Western Zhou to the Qing Dynasty (1100BCE-1911CE) experienced 3,790 wars and upheavals.³ The thinkers who have interpreted the stories of these peoples are represented by Legalism (*Fajia*) and Confucianism (*Rujia*). Alastair Iain Johnston, the author of the most comprehensive preceding study of Chinese strategic culture, took up the external actions of the Ming dynasty and identified the realpolitik character of Chinese strategic culture and the logic of Confucian rhetorical justification.⁴ Johnston called the former the "parabellum paradigm" and the latter the "Confucian-Mencian paradigm".

Among the Legalists, Shang Yang and Han Feizi advocated wealth and military power under the monarch's prerogative and the maintenance of order based on the ethical doctrine that human nature is fundamentally evil and on draconianism, while military strategists such as Sun Tzu and Wu Tzu advocated a philosophy of winning wars. Sun Tzu defined warfare as "deception (*guidao*)" and argued that fighting and losing is a poor strategy, fighting and winning an average strategy, and winning without fighting a superior strategy, and that a monarch should "win first and fight later" by making all possible preparations. In Sun Tzu's world, all forms of intrigue and deceit were to be used to deceive the enemy, and the goal of victory justifies any means necessary.

On the other hand, Confucian thought is a code of conduct for the ruling class that seeks to govern the country, or maintain social order, based on the idea of human nature as inherently good, as well as a moral code for the individual ruler. Since the Way of Heaven and Earth is to be manifested by a virtuous person, good government by the emperor as the Son of Heaven is justified. However, this idea can easily turn into a self-righteous, self-justifying logic that everything is right because the actual ruling dynasties and regimes are virtuous. Even if an action takes the "parabellum paradigm" approach, it is justified by the "Confucian-Mencian paradigm."

An expert on China's foreign policy, Chisako Masuo, also points out that not only is there "a strong desire among the Chinese to be respected by the world through moral superiority and cultural power," but also that "it is only with regard to their own country that the Chinese recognize positive spiritual elements such as 'virtuousness' in diplomacy."⁵

According to the analysis of US strategist Michael Pillsbury, the key element is deception.⁶ In other words, the "pacifist" discourses that can be explained by the "Confucian-Mencian paradigm" are in

reality deliberate strategies of explaining China's motivations to foreigners designed to conceal the real "parabellum paradigm" behavior.

2. The Experience of Being Invaded and the Influence of Socialism

The Chinese people have been repeatedly educated about the horrors of the imperialist wars and the achievements of the socialist revolution that Chinese society has most recently experienced. After the First Opium War (1840-42), China lost its previous status as the "Celestial Empire" and was overrun by the imperialist powers. The Chinese people have an extremely strong sense of victimhood due to their historical experience of aggression from the imperialist powers. China's increasing demands for sovereignty and territory in recent years are a manifestation of a kind of "irredentism."

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China has always been faced with wars. These wars and crises are all interpreted and taught in China as having been caused by threats to Chinese territory and sovereignty from foreign countries, Taiwanese authorities, and others. For this reason, China's actions are morally justified as it is seen as the "unilateral victim."

It is not unfathomable that socialist China, which has been under constant pressure from powerful capitalist countries, has become somewhat paranoid that foreign countries are always trying hard to restrain China from becoming more powerful, and that China letting its guard down even slightly will result in invasion. Particularly since the second Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989, there has been a strong belief that the West is taking advantage of the "reform and openness" policy to overthrow the socialist system by peaceful means ("Peaceful Evolution").

In addition, the organizational culture of socialism is thought to have been influential in the total shifting of responsibility to the outside world. Inherent in Marxism is the logic that no one can be held accountable for results as long as the motive is pure. In addition, bureaucracy provides little opportunity to correct its own mistakes. Since there is no opposition party or media in China that freely criticizes the government authorities, society is flooded with self-praise and criticism of foreign countries pushed exclusively by propaganda organs.

According to sociologist Max Weber, ethical consciousness in politics can be divided into ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility.⁷ An ethicist of responsibility believes that he must assume all the consequences of one's actions and that one is responsible for the consequences. An ethicist of conviction is a person of pure conviction who considers himself absolved of any failure or evil that results from such conviction, placing the blame on others, and does not believe that responsibility lies in consequences.⁸ Therefore, the ethicist of conviction does not hold himself responsible for the consequences of righteous actions, even if they go wrong, but instead holds others responsible.

3. International Structural Perceptions

Next, we will examine contemporary China's perception and behavior toward the outside world. The aforementioned Michael Pillsbury discovered from examining papers published by researchers at Chinese

think tanks that Chinese elites analyze international relations by quoting the Chinese classics. Pillsbury cites examples of nine researchers from five Chinese think tanks who drew experiences and lessons from the Chinese Warring States Period and ancient statecraft.⁹

According to Pillsbury, the Chinese researchers believed that the age in which the classics of Chinese statecraft were produced was a time when a multistate competition to become “hegemon” featured stratagems, small wars, interstate conferences, treaties, and what Western scholars of international relations would label “anarchy.” Therefore, they argue, the experience and lessons gained were about “how to become a hegemon,” and “how to survive at the hands of a predatory hegemon.” Using these classics, some Chinese scholars assess the United States as a powerful hegemon and explore the path that China should take.

For example, in a discussion of “multipolarity,” a post-Cold War perception of foreign affairs characteristic of China, a Chinese People's Liberation Army researcher noted that the future “multipolar” world bear a striking resemblance to the Warring States Period, and that Sun Tzu's *Art of War* was “a product of a multipolar situation in China 2,500 years ago”.

In terms of foreign relations, China has traditionally held to the ideas of working individually against weaker states, resorting to a team with other states as an expedient against stronger states (*hezonglianhe*), seeking to strengthen relations with distant states in order to deal with neighbors with whom a state is at odds (*yuanjiaogjingong*), and preserving one's own state by having a foreign state attack another threatening foreign state (*yiyizhiyi*).

The history researcher Liu Jie also points out that this traditional Chinese mindset is the very essence of classical power politics, and that there are those who liken current international relations to China's “Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods,” and that such idea has gained wide acceptance.¹⁰ Chisako Masuo also points out that China has a “tendency to portray the world as a whirlpool of intrigue” and “an extremely strong predilection to regard relations between great powers through a conspiratorial lens”.¹¹ There is thus a tendency in China to hold a realist view of the world.

Conclusion--The Source of Unique Ideas

This paper has attempted to discuss to what extent China's foreign perceptions, strategies and actions can be interpreted through strategic culture theory.

The main reason is that the logic of interpreting China's foreign perceptions, strategies and actions is based on a Legalist (i.e., essentially realist) logic. China prefers in particular the analogy of the Warring States Period when interpreting the multipolar world. But when explaining or justifying its own actions, it uses Confucian (i.e., essentially liberalist) logic. From its “New Security Concept” to its use of force, China goes to great lengths to emphasize its “moral righteousness,” claiming that other countries are entirely responsible for the problems that have arisen. Through the massive and prolonged dissemination of this discourse through its propaganda apparatus, China has in effect inculcated in its own people the same ideas as its government. Probably this is why they do not strongly question their own discourse.

Moreover, socialist characteristics are latent in the above two logical approaches. There are two ideological and cultural currents in China that are something more than simply analogies to the two major theories of contemporary international relations. We can point to the penetration of systematic justification by the Communist Party in the more thorough and methodical criticism of the external world and self-justification. In China, the entire population is expected to liberalistically extol the actions of their country, just as the propaganda organs do. Thus, the opening statement by Xi Jinping is also a natural part of the discourse in China.

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¹ "Speech by H. E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at China International Friendship Conference in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the CPAFFC," The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, May 15, 2014, <https://cpaffc.org.cn/index/news/detail/id/6541/lang/2.html>, accessed on June 26, 2022.

² Li Jijun, "Zhanlue wenhua(Strategic Culture)," *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue (Chinese Military Science)*, No. 1, 1997, pp. 8-15. Yu Qifen, *Guoji zhanlue lun(International Strategy Theory)*, Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 1998, p.2.

³ Shu Guang Zhang, "China: Traditional and Revolutionary Heritage," Ken Booth and Russell Trood eds., *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region*, (London: MacMillan Press), 1999, p. 29.

⁴ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy Chinese History*, (Princeton University Press), 1995.

⁵ Chisako T. Masuo, *Chugoku no kodo genri: Karera tokuyuu no ruru towa(China's Behavioral Principles: International Relations Determined by the Domestic Currents)*, (Tokyo: Chuko Publishing), 2019, p.27, 32.

⁶ See, Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co.), 2015, chapter 1.

⁷ Max Weber, edited by David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, translated by Rodney Livingstone, *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing) 2004, p.83.

⁸ Takashi Tachibana, *Nihon Kyosanto no kenkyu(A Study on the Communist Party of Japan)*, Vol. 3, (Tokyo: Kodansha), 1983, p. 179.

⁹ Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press), 2000, pp. xxxv-xlvi.

¹⁰ Ryu Ketsu(Liu Jie), *Chuugokujin no rekishi kan(Historical Views of the Chinese)*, (Tokyo: Bungeishunju), 1999, pp. 83-85.

¹¹ Chisako T. Masuo, *Chugoku no kodo genri*, p. 34, 38.