History 484

Strategic Culture: Explaining the Behavior of the Chinese Military State

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Strategic Culture: Explaining the Behavior of the Chinese Military State

The Confucian-Mencian cultural paradigm and its aversion to violence is a well-known Chinese strategic culture, supposedly defining a way or style in which its military acts; at its most bold, this paradigm has been recently touted by statesmen like Hu Jintao to assuage regional neighbors nervous about a rising, more bellicose, China.[1] However, China's history is not a peaceful one - at the very least, it is not always in agreement with a Confucian culture "disesteemed in violence."[2] Yuan-kang Wang and Alistair Johnston have both attempted to explain the discrepancies between the pacifist Confucian culture and a violent historical reality.[3] Johnston adopts a *parabellum* strategic culture, a counterpart to the Confucian one, with a comparatively realist view and more violent tenets. In contrast, Wang does away with the idea of strategic culture altogether and maintains that this history is determined by structural realism, a universally logical reaction to an anarchic system that does not draw from culture.

The sole point of agreement between the two authors indicates they have both interpreted historical reality similarly. Both recognize the history of China as a violent one, pointing out how the "pacifist bias of the Chinese tradition"[4] is a stereotype inadequate for explaining the millennia of incessant fighting both internally and externally. Therefore, the distinctively pacifist Confucian strategic culture, with its moral limitations regarding *jus ad bello* (just war) and its general preference of *Wen* (civil) over *Wu* (martial), is incomplete in describing how Chinese leaders have acted to produce a significantly bloodier history. Critically, it is a history that is filled with not just defensive war, as Confucianism permits, but also plenty of offensive,

[1] History 484, Lecture 4.
[2] Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), page 62.
[3] History 484, Lecture 4.
[4] Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), page 62.

expansive, war,[5] something that is difficult for rulers schooled primarily in the Confucian classics to justify. Johnston and Wang's disagreement lies in how they explain this problem.

Johnston offers a simple resolution: instead of just the dominant Confucian strategic culture, there is perhaps another strategic culture acting on the minds of Chinese leaders. Dubbed the *parabellum* strategic culture, this one is realpolitik and unafraid to engage in offensive, aggressive warfare if it furthers the safety of the state, its main goal. It regards war (if need be, offensive) as a viable way to maintain peace. Johnston's main analysis lies in analyzing the *Seven Military Classics* (major strategic texts on warfare, such as *Wu Zi, Si Ma Fa,* and *Sun Zi*), texts that would have been available to statesmen and have constituted a significant part of strategic culture, not unlike the way the Confucian texts were rigorously studied. Johnston concludes that most of these texts "reflect essentially a *parabellum* conceptualization."[6] The analysis is based on a type of preferred grand strategy in each text, with options being accommodation, defense, and offense,[7] with only the latter two involving the physical deployment of arms. Confucian culture stresses the importance of radiating virtue, and of fighting being a last resort, and thus regards accommodation as most effective; however, the *Seven Military Classics* often regard offense as the most effective.[8] They go into detail about specific strategies as well: all seven permit invasion, and most permit military and political destruction, including the "extermination," "killing," and "execution" of the enemy.[9] The Confucian culture only very rarely permits offensive invasion, and never permits the wholesale killing of the enemy; it is clear that the *Seven Military Classics* represent a separate group of

[5] Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), page 106.
[6] Ibid., page 143.
[7] Ibid., page 145.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

ideas that do not fit under the Confucian culture. To Johnston, the *parabellum* strategic culture developed in parallel with its Confucian counterpart and will often appear in texts "clothed … in decision rules that are consistent with the Confucian-Mencian strategic culture."[10] I must finally point out that Johnston very much regards *parabellum* strategic culture as a real *culture* – with texts, teachers, students, and ultimately, a place in the mind of every *Chinese* decision maker.

Wang rejects *parabellum* strategic culture as a *culture* altogether. Though there is no dispute from Wang regarding the inability of Confucian strategic culture to adequately explain military behavior, he believes that the realpolitik inclination of Chinese leaders is due not to culture but to the "material structure of the system."[11] Wang maintains that Johnston has mischaracterized the importance of the military texts that Johnston has used to form his analysis:[12] in reality, "compared to military classics, Confucian classics played a far greater role in the socialization of top court officials,"[13] suggesting that military classics were not prevalent enough to form a separate strategic culture. Moreover, the military education system focused on "skills such as archery and horsemanship, not on mastering the military classics"[14] and it would be likely that anyone with the literary skill needed to master the military classics would be devoted to the (far more prestigious) civil service examinations instead,[15] a proposition which weakens Johnston's conclusion that a separate culture can be discerned from military texts. Wang identifies another problem with the *parabellum* strategic culture, in that it does not explain why leaders would act the way they do, why the culture would develop in such a way, or, in his

[10] Ibid., page 154.
[11] Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), page 13.
[12] Ibid., page 24.
[13] Ibid., page 26.
[14] Ibid., page 27.
[15] Ibid.

own words, "where the realpolitik strategic culture comes from."[16] Wang's proposition, however, appears to address this problem: structural realism's central claim is that the prevalence of anarchy compels states to act aggressively,[17] in a realpolitik manner – "the logic of strategy and waging war is universal rather than … cultural."[18] Circumstances (of anarchy) determine the actions of the state; it is also why there appears to be similar trends in strategy from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz to Machiavelli.[19] To Wang, the anarchic circumstances of Chinese history compelled them to act in defiance of the very real Confucian strategic culture; this simple explanation does not suffer the flaws in reasoning he identifies with associating realpolitik action with a strategic culture, as Johnston does.

In conclusion, the explanations offered by Johnston and Wang paint an interesting picture of Chinese military history. Its undisputedly frequent departures from pacifist Confucian doctrine may be explained by either another strategic culture or by the anarchic circumstances of war; in any case, we understand that there is another factor at play. This factor, whatever it may be, is critical in understanding, and predicting, how the Chinese state will act, in an era when the sleeping tiger is well and truly awake.

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., page 28.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.