

Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a 'China Threat' Inevitable?

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Are the relations among nations inevitably conflictual? Neorealism and neoliberalism share the rationalist assumption that states are self-regarding, but debate over whether states pursue relative or absolute gains. Scholars focusing on identity have recently joined the controversy. Wendt (1992) has argued against the realists that conflict is not the inevitable product of anarchy. Drawing on social psychology to defend realism, Mercer (1995) has countered that conflict is 'an inescapable feature of . . . interstate relations'. This paper argues that international identity dynamics do not inexorably lead to competition, let alone conflict. Mercer's pessimism is unwarranted. Drawing on social identity theory (SIT), it argues that intergroup conflict is a highly contingent outcome, and that social psychology provides insights into when the realists are right, and when the liberals are. Utilizing examples from Sino-American relations, the paper also seeks to contribute to the stalemated debate in the China field between optimists and pessimists over the existence of a 'China threat'.

KEY WORDS ♦ China threat ♦ conflict ♦ identity ♦ inter-group relations ♦ Sino-American/US-China relations

1. Introduction

What do you see? A cuddly panda or a menacing dragon? Westerners interpreting Chinese foreign policy, like subjects staring at inkblots during a Rorschach test, frequently reveal much more about themselves than they do about China itself. Are we fated to project our ingrained 'gut feelings' and broader world-views onto China? Or can International Relations (IR) theory help analysts interrogate the intentions that actually drive China's foreign policy makers? Specifically, when will Chinese, like a cuddly panda, choose

cooperation? And when will they, like a fierce dragon, choose confrontation?

Realists like Paul Kennedy (1987) have argued that rising powers and hegemons invariably go to war. Policy-makers and pundits like Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (2000) and IR theorist John Mearsheimer (2001) have drawn on such arguments to suggest that China is a revisionist power destined to clash with the US. China IR scholars have also suggested that China is fated to use force against the US. Tom Christensen (1996: 37) has declared China the 'high church of realpolitik' today. In *Chinese Realism*, Iain Johnston (1995: 61) similarly argued that Chinese are socialized into a 'hard realpolitik' *parabellum* strategic culture/ideology that favors 'hitting hard and hitting first'.¹ The Chinese, in this view, are predisposed to choose force over accommodation.

IR theorists in the liberal tradition, by contrast, have been more optimistic. Traditional liberals like Woodrow Wilson viewed human nature as fundamentally good; nations, therefore, can coexist without conflict. Today, neoliberals maintain that international institutions and interdependence restrain state aggression. In the US–China case, optimists like David Mike Lampton (2003) point to economic interdependence and common security concerns as ensuring peace.

This article joins a new controversy in the old IR debate over cooperation and conflict. Constructivist IR theorists have focused on the social — rather than material — side of the debate. In a 1992 article, Alexander Wendt proclaimed in his title that 'Anarchy is What States Make of It'. It may 'lead to competitive power politics', he explained, but it 'also may not'. To Wendt, structural realists are wrong to assume self-help from the material structure of the world system — 'Self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy' (Wendt, 1992: 394, 395). In asserting that the relations among nations are not inherently conflictual, Wendt provided ammunition for liberal critics of realism.

Drawing on social psychology to defend realism, in 1995 Jonathan Mercer took issue with Wendt's critique of self-help. In 'Anarchy and Identity', Mercer argued that ethnocentrism explains the group egoism that neorealists take for granted. Conflict, in his view, is 'an *inescapable* feature of intergroup and interstate relations' (Mercer, 1995: 233). Mercer in effect uses social identity theory (SIT) to create a primordial super realism, providing neorealism with the psychological foundation Kenneth Waltz had cast aside in 1979.² Samuel Huntington (1993) has made a similar argument at the even broader level of 'civilizations' — With the end of the Cold War, the major civilizations of the world — each with its own distinct identity — are destined to clash. Identity dynamics, Mercer and Huntington maintain, make international conflict inevitable.

In his 1999 *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt defends himself against Mercer's 1995 critique, arguing that the 'in-group bias' Mercer cites does not predetermine enmity. Wendt provides no empirical support for this position, however. Furthermore, his book provides few clues as to *when* intergroup conflict will occur.³

This article argues that intergroup identity dynamics do *not* inexorably lead to conflict. The literature in social psychology Mercer used to critique Wendt does not support his pessimistic conclusion that interstate conflict is inevitable. I thus join Wendt in questioning the inevitability of anarchy and self-help in international politics. However, unlike Wendt, I highlight contingency — the specific conditions that promote conflict in international affairs, and those that militate against it. Depending on circumstances, states may lock horns, but they also may not. Neoliberals and neorealists both have it right — some of the time. The problem is that a narrow focus on material interests alone usually cannot tell us when states will do battle. By redirecting our gaze to the very real realm of ideal interests, social psychology provides insights into when the world of absolute gains will predominate, and when the world of relative gains will.

Based on recent findings in social psychology, I make concrete predictions about the conditions under which identification with the nation will lead to international conflict. In brief, we all identify with our nations and imbue our national identities with positive value. When that positivity is challenged, leading to (1) consequential, (2) relative comparisons with (3) salient external nations, we *promote* competition, the rivalry of two or more groups for limited material or symbolic resources. Competition necessarily precedes conflict, the open clash of opposing groups. However, the absence of a single one of these three conditions will inhibit competition. Furthermore, there are five different ways that comparisons may be framed that *reduce* the likelihood of international competition — social mobility ('exit' from a national identity) and four different forms of social creativity (shifting the dimension under comparison, changing the values of the attributes, changing the target of comparison and self-deception). The cards are thus stacked against a competitive outcome.

Of course, identity is only one possible cause of conflict. This paper only addresses the Wendt–Mercer debate over the nature of interstate competition in the symbolic realm; it does not address the dispute between neorealists and neoliberals over competition in the material realm. And this paper only treats identity as an independent variable (as a possible cause of conflict); identity conflict can also be a dependent variable — the result, for example, of objective conflicts of interest.

I will use examples from Sino–American relations to illustrate my analysis. I refer to 'Sino–American relations' rather than 'US–China relations'

deliberately. My focus will be decidedly Sinocentric — what recent Chinese nationalist writings about the US can tell us about the likelihood of conflict in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, in addition to joining a debate over conflict in IR theory, this article also seeks to contribute to the stalemated debate in the China field over the existence of a ‘China threat’. Specifically, I suggest that Iain Johnston (1995) and Tom Christensen (1996) may be right about a Chinese proclivity towards the use of force — some of the time. Social psychology can provide insights into when Chinese will choose cooperation and when they will choose conflict. In a comparison of China’s apology diplomacy following the Belgrade embassy bombing of 1999 and the spy plane collision of 2001, I suggest that symbolic and rationalist approaches provide complementary — not competing — explanations of Chinese behaviors.

By focusing on the recent high tide of Chinese anti-Americanism rather than, say, US–Canadian relations, I stack the cards against my argument. If Chinese nationalist writings can be used to support my contention that conflict is a *contingent* outcome, I will have made a ‘crucially hard case’ theoretically (Eckstein, 1975). I do not, however, seek to make any substantive claims about the relative weight of nationalism vis-a-vis other Chinese attitudes toward foreign affairs. Furthermore, because I bracket cultural differences and history in an attempt to apply universal social psychological insights to IR theory, I cannot make strong claims about the future of Sino–American relations. To repeat, the Chinese examples are used to *illustrate* the theory; they do not seek to *prove* anything.

2. The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations

For most social psychologists today, groups do not act; individuals act. The days of ‘groupthink’ (e.g. Janis, 1983) are over. Social psychology today focuses on the impact of group membership on individual behavior. Therefore, when James Fearon and David Laitin (1996: 717) dismiss psychological approaches as ‘group-level’ to advocate their own ‘individual interactions’ approach, they mischaracterize psychology, in the process doing themselves and political science a disservice.

Theories of intergroup relations in social psychology, interestingly, parallel the debate in IR over conflict. The first major approach, realistic (group) competition theory (RCT), supports the rationalist position. Based on a 1954 study at a summer camp in Robbers Cove, Oklahoma, Muzafer Sherif (1966) and his colleagues found that the introduction of material competition was sufficient to divide an otherwise homogeneous group of boys into rival groups. Conversely, the introduction of a joint task (extracting a ‘stuck’ bus) led the two groups to cooperate. Such findings led to the development

of RCT, which maintained that objective relations of material interest determine group formation and intergroup relations. In other words, patterns of resource interdependence drive cooperation or conflict. RCT is the implicit social psychology of rationalist IR.

Further experimental work soon revealed, however, that the direction of causality implied by RCT was unclear — yes, material competition could lead to group formation, but simply categorizing people into separate groups could also lead to ingroup identification and bias. Material competition, in other words, is a sufficient but not necessary condition for group formation (Brown, 1986: 543). The development of social identity, according to the now dominant social identity theory (SIT), was not the epiphenomenal byproduct of patterns of resource interdependence, but the result of self-categorization. John Turner (1978) even found that concerns for social identity could take precedence over the individual's pursuit of material self-interest. The SIT challenge to RCT thus parallels the constructivist challenge to earlier rationalist (both realist and liberal) approaches in IR in that both involve a shift in focus from objective conflicts of interest to identity dynamics.

Jon Mercer (1995: 251) maintains that 'SIT provides theoretical and empirical support for the neorealist assumption that states are a priori self-regarding.' I read SIT differently.⁴ Group categorization and comparison do *not* inevitably lead to intergroup competition and conflict. Recent experimental evidence in SIT indicates that group membership is indeterminate in this respect. As social psychologist Marilynn Brewer notes, 'any relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup hostility is progressive and contingent rather than necessary and inevitable'. Two stages intervene between the formation of ingroup identity and intergroup conflict — ingroup positivity and intergroup competition. Conflict is thus the last stage of a four-stage process:

1. ingroup identification
2. ingroup positivity
3. intergroup competition
4. intergroup conflict.

Although all humans, as social beings, likely engage in the first two processes, the latter two stages are indeterminate — they are not inevitable but require the impetus of additional conditions (Brewer, 2000). Ingroup identification, in other words, invariably leads to a positive evaluation of the ingroup, but it does not inexorably lead to intergroup competition, let alone conflict.

The question is *what* these conditions are and *when* ingroup positivity leads to intergroup competition. In this article, I focus on this transition

between stages two and three, only turning to the equally contingent transition between stages three and four in the conclusion. I suggest that social comparison lies at the juncture of stages two and three. When the goodness or honor of our nations is challenged, we will compare our nations with other nations. International comparisons will only lead to competition under certain conditions, however. Specifically, the comparisons must be:

1. salient
2. consequential
3. zero-sum.

All three of these conditions must hold for competition to ensue (each is a necessary but not sufficient cause). If *any* of the following occur during the comparison process, however, competition will be avoided:

1. social mobility — ‘exit’ from a social identity
2. social creativity₁ — changing the dimension of comparison
3. social creativity₂ — changing the meaning of the value being compared
4. social creativity₃ — changing the target of comparison
5. social creativity₄ — self-deception.

Each of these five conditions, in other words, is sufficient by itself to prevent competition. Theoretically, therefore, no competition seems to be the most likely outcome of international comparison, a prediction supported by James Fearon and David Laitin’s (1996: 717) empirical findings on the relative non-occurrence of ethnic conflict. These social psychological variables, I argue, help explain when we will inhabit a realist world of relative gains, and when we will live in a liberal community of absolute gains.

3. Ingroup Identification and Positivity: When ‘Good’ Is Good Enough

Experimental work in the SIT tradition has convincingly demonstrated (a) that we identify ourselves with groups and (b) that we privilege them. First, we associate ourselves with groups that, in effect, become part of our identities. SIT posits two mutually exclusive aspects of the self — personal identity and social identity. Henri Tajfel (1981: 255) defined social identity as ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group . . . together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’. When social identity is salient, the self is extended out and into the group prototype, a process involving self-stereotyping. The group becomes represented in the individual’s self-concept — its concerns become the individual’s concerns.⁵

Once we have identified with groups, we look to others to better

understand our social identities. A century ago, sociologist Charles Cooley called this the 'looking-glass self' — 'Our ideal self is constructed chiefly out of ideas about us attributed to other people' (Cooley, 1922 [1902]: 397). George Mead concurred, noting that 'the individual experiences himself . . . only indirectly . . . by taking the attitudes of other individuals towards himself' (Mead, 1965 [1934]: 138). In 1954, psychologist Leon Festinger similarly proposed that when we are uncertain about our beliefs or social standing, we engage in 'social reality testing' through comparison with reference groups (Festinger, 1954). Festinger's social comparison theory holds for both personal and social identities. When personal identity is salient, we undertake interpersonal comparisons; when social identity is pertinent, we engage in intergroup comparisons. We gain knowledge about our personal and social identities through comparisons with other individuals and groups.⁶ As Yu Xinyan writes in a 1995 patriotic education handbook entitled *Foreigners' Views of China*:

If you want to know if your dress is correct, you can look in a mirror. If you want to know if your behavior is appropriate, you can listen to what other people say about it. If you want to know your own nationality, your own nation-state, it is necessary to listen to the views of foreigners.⁷

Constructivists in IR share Yu's insight — Wendt (1994), for instance, argues that a need for 'ontological security' drives states to seek the recognition of other states.⁸ We look to others to understand our personal and social identities.

Why do we assimilate ourselves into groups? Social psychologists have explored a number of motives, including uncertainty reduction (Hogg and Abrams, 1993), desires for inclusion (Brewer, 1993), belonging (Durkheim, 1963 [1897]; Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and existential distress (Castano et al., 2002). However, it is the motive of self-esteem that has received the greatest attention.⁹ At first, SIT researchers thought that desires for self-esteem drive us to join groups. Evidence of the opposite process has been more robust, however — to the extent that we associate with certain groups, we gain (and lose) 'collective self-esteem' from that group's accomplishments and failures (Crocker and Luhtanen, 1990). One group of social psychologists, for instance, found that students tended to wear their school colors more often following a football victory than after a loss, a finding they explained as a desire to 'bask in reflected glory' (Cialdini et al., 1976). The same is true of our national identities. In another experiment, women who were shown a clip from an altered *Rocky IV*, in which the American boxer (played by Sylvester Stalone) lost to the Russian, were found to have lost national self-esteem (Branscombe and Wann, 1994).¹⁰

In addition to identifying with groups, research in the SIT tradition has demonstrated that we see the groups we associate ourselves with as basically good, and favor our fellow ingroup members over outgroup members. Indeed, the mere mention of ingroup signifiers like 'we', 'us', and 'our' is sufficient to generate positive affect (Perdue et al., 1990). And experimental studies have overwhelmingly demonstrated that ingroup favoritism is robust even when the individual has nothing to gain.

Desires to maintain ingroup positivity motivate intergroup social comparisons (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). We want others to confirm our positive views of ourselves.¹¹ The 1990 *A Pictorial History of the War to Resist America and Aid Korea*, which mixes actual photographs with cartoon drawings to tell the 'history' of the Korean War to young Chinese readers, is an arresting example of this project. It is not enough that the Chinese authors unilaterally proclaim Chinese heroism and condemn American evil — both friends and enemies must verify those claims. For example, frame 1000 of *A Pictorial History* is a famous photograph of an old Korean woman embracing a Chinese soldier — Korean gratitude toward China confirms Chinese beneficence. In frame 696 — a cartoon drawing of a Caucasian singing with a group of Chinese soldiers — an American similarly verifies Chinese rectitude. The caption explains:

This American prisoner's name is Larry. The policy of superior treatment of prisoners quickly dissolved his antagonistic mentality towards us. He frequently sang: 'Hailalalala, hailalalala . . . The Chinese and Korean people's strength is great, and has defeated the American devils!' (Liang, 1990: 366)

'Larry' thus confirms the Chinese authors' claim to ingroup positivity. 'When we are accepted as we present ourselves', sociologist Thomas Scheff (1988: 396) suggests, 'we usually feel rewarded by the pleasant emotions of pride and fellow feeling'. I concur with a single amendment — it is our *perception* of others' acceptance of our claims — rather than their actual views of us (as our farfetched cartoon makes clear) — that determines our emotional response.

Such affect is no 'mere' emotional matter, however: it has highly instrumental implications. When we believe that our claims to positive ingroup identity are affirmed, we not only feel good, we gain confidence. One group of social psychologists found, for instance, that in subjects for whom being a fan of a particular team was an important aspect of their social identity, assessments of personal efficacy (like their ability to 'get a date' with an attractive member of the opposite sex, win a game of darts, etc.) were significantly higher after a team victory than after a team loss (Hirt et al., 1992). Pride in past accomplishments translates into confidence about the future (Barbalet, 1998: 87). Basking in 'victory' over America in Korea, for

example, is an important psychological resource when confidence in China's prospects in confronting the US is again required. The *Pictorial History* discussed before was issued in 1990, when the Beijing elite, facing US-led international sanctions following the Tiananmen Massacre, took advantage of the 40th anniversary commemorations of the onset of the Korean War to bolster Chinese self-confidence. The role of the war as a psychological resource is often explicit. For instance, war veteran Yang Dezhi was blunt — 'The spiritual riches that the War has left me are precious. I am *confident* that China will prosper' (Yang, 1990: 3). In 1996, following the deployment of two American aircraft carriers near Taiwan, Chinese nationalists again drew on 'victory' in Korea to revive what appears to have been a shaken confidence about future confrontations with America. The cover of a 1996 *Shenzhen Panorama Weekly*, for instance, shows a large photograph of a Korean War veteran sternly waving his finger. It was accompanied by a large caption, warning: 'We have squared off before'. Pride in the past can bolster confidence in an uncertain future.

Perhaps the most fascinating example of the desire for external confirmation of ingroup positivity among contemporary Chinese nationalists involves their infatuation with Henry Kissinger. Kissinger's words of praise for China's past and current leadership, and predictions of China's future rise, are popular enough among Chinese nationalists to be dubbed a 'Kissinger complex'. Kissinger's praise of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai is a favorite theme in nationalist treatments of the 1972 establishment of diplomatic relations between China and America. In a 1998 interview, for example, *People's Daily* correspondent Li Yunfei claims that Kissinger gushed:

I cherish deep feelings for Zhou Enlai . . . [he] was a man of noble character who towered above the rest in intelligence and had profound knowledge and extensive learning. He was an outstanding politician . . . The profundity of Zhou Enlai's understanding of the world situation was amazing.

Li also lingers in his article over the minutiae of Kissinger's etiquette in receiving him — 'He hurried over to shake hands with this reporter, saying sincerely: "If you were not a reporter from China, I would not be able to find time to do your interview"' (Li Yunfei, 1998). Li and his *People's Daily* editors clearly enjoy both 'basking in the reflected glory' of Zhou's greatness and Kissinger's obsequious praise of China.

This 'Kissinger complex' involves more than just creating pride in China's past — it is also about creating confidence in the future. Kissinger's recent writings on international relations have been extremely popular among Chinese nationalists because they are seen as predicting America's decline and China's immanent rise. Tang Zhengyu, for example, concludes his section of the popular 1996 anti-American sensation, *China Can Say No*,

with the question: 'Some say that the 19th century was the English century, and that the 20th century is the American century. What about the 21st century?' Tang supports his answer — 'The 21st century will be China's' — by appending a translation of a 1996 Kissinger speech, the gist of which is that America will not be able to contain China (Song et al., 1996: 199, 202–5). Kissinger is featured even more prominently on the back cover of *Surpassing the USA*, predicting America's demise (Xi and Ma, 1996). Kissinger helps these Chinese nationalists relieve any doubts they might have about China's future glory.

When our desires for positive self-confirmation are not met, however, we are not pleased. Social psychologists have found that if a member of another group is perceived to impugn one's own group, one's sense of personal self-esteem may be threatened as well. Collective and personal self-esteem are intertwined.¹²

Chinese nationalists' anger at being denied international affirmation is perhaps best symbolized by their 'Nobel Prize complex' — a resentment that Chinese achievements have been denied their rightful confirmation by the West. Chinese economists believe that they should be awarded a Nobel Prize for China's 'economic miracle' (Zhao, 1997: 731). One Chinese scholar explained that 'with Deng's 1992 Southern tour and the new spurt of economic development, Chinese are increasingly proud of their accomplishments. They thus find it increasingly hard to bear the disregard and affronts of others' (Jin Niu, 1996a: 5). To add insult to injury, when the first Nobel Prize was awarded to a Chinese in 2000, it was given to Guo Xingjian, who is considered a dissident writer — a traitor living in Paris. Even *China Can Say No* author Gu Qingsheng agrees that the 'Nobel complex' indicates that 'we have a psychological problem. . . . Although we say that there is nothing special about foreigners, we are very sensitive [toward their views]' (Song et al., 1996: 285 [note 48]). The Nobel complex, I argue, is the flip side of Chinese nationalists' Kissinger complex — they are two sides of the same coin of desire for international affirmation.

In sum, the need for confirmation of ingroup positivity motivates intergroup comparisons. When ingroup positivity is affirmed, we are pleased; if it is not, anger and intergroup competition may ensue. In the Chinese case, Kissinger is beloved for providing high-status confirmation for Chinese nationalists' claims of superiority; the Nobel Prize Committee, by contrast, is reviled for withholding such validation.

That 'we' must be good does not, however, require that 'they' must be bad. Allen Whiting (1995: 295) recognized this distinction in a 1995 exploration of Chinese nationalism:

Affirmative nationalism centres exclusively on 'us' as a positive in-group referent with pride in attributes and achievements. Assertive nationalism adds 'them' as a negative out-group referent that challenges the in-group's interests and possibly its identity.

Attitudes toward self and other are not necessarily zero-sum, but can vary independently. Favoring one group does not require disfavoring another group. Studies of racism in the US and Europe, for instance, have found evidence of a 'symbolic' (Kinder and Sears, 1981) or 'aversive' (Murrell et al., 1994) racism that involves pro-White, rather than anti-Black, attitudes and behaviors. Ingroup positivity reserves trust and sympathy for one's own, withholding such positive sentiments from the outgroup (Brewer, 2000: note 15). Ingroup love, however, does not necessarily lead to outgroup hate.

4. Intergroup Competition: When 'Better' is Better than 'Good'

So, when will ingroup identification (stage one) and positivity (stage two) lead to intergroup competition (stage three) and conflict (stage four)? When, in short, does ingroup love lead to outgroup hate?

Social comparison processes lie at the heart of any answer to this question. Comparison is not inherently competitive. First, it is only when comparisons are made with salient others, are consequential and are framed in zero-sum terms that intergroup competition may ensue. Second, the presence of any one of five forms of social mobility or social creativity is sufficient by itself to prevent competition.

Necessary But Not Sufficient Causes of Intergroup Competition

For competition to follow, comparisons must (a) be made with salient others, (b) be consequential and (c) be framed in zero-sum terms. Each is a necessary but not sufficient cause of intergroup competition.

First, *to whom* do we compare ourselves? Comparisons must be made with *salient others* to lead to competition. It is only when a comparison is made with external groups that intergroup competition becomes a possible outcome. Interpersonal and intragroup comparisons will not lead directly to intergroup competition. The proximity, availability and similarity of other ingroup members makes them ideal objects of interpersonal comparison. For example, in most circumstances individual Chinese will compare their lot with that of their neighbors — other Chinese — and not with Americans across the Pacific Ocean. This generates a tendency toward interpersonal and against intergroup comparisons, militating against intergroup competition.

Intragroup comparisons also inhibit competition between groups. For example, temporal comparisons — Are we better off than we were before?

— militate against international competition.¹³ Chinese cultural conservatives today, for instance, construct themselves as ‘realists’ and ‘pragmatists’ against the foil of China’s recent past — the ‘radicals’ of the late 1980s and even the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) (Xu, 1999). Inter-ethnic comparisons will not lead directly to international competition either. When Han chauvinists exoticize Chinese minorities as infantile, feminine and barbaric to flatter themselves as mature, masculine, and civilized, they seek to construct a Han vision of Chinese national identity (Schein, 1997). They may generate domestic tensions in the process, but such ‘otherization’ will not directly lead to international competition.

In addition to being *external*, the salient other must also be a *desirable* object of comparison. National histories, like all ‘autobiographies’, generally tell the story of the nation in relation to other nations. Nationalist historians render complex pasts into Manichean histories pitting a good ‘we’ against an evil ‘them’ (Kaviraj, 1992: 6). These histories can help us identify who the desired object of comparison is. In Chinese histories, it is usually the West in general and the US in particular. The West, capitalized as a proper noun to signify its reification, has become China’s alter ego. Following Edward Said’s discussion of Orientalism, this phenomenon has been labeled ‘Occidentalism’ (Chen Xiaomei, 1995).

In Chinese eyes, however, Americans are racially and culturally different from Chinese. They are not, therefore, ideal objects for comparison. Identity involves both similarity and difference, and ‘Western devils’ are too different for most Chinese to identify with. It is the more proximate and similar Japan, instead, that has served as a more ideal object of self-other dialectics.¹⁴

So, why force comparison with the US? Because comparisons with the US are *desirable*. When Chinese nationalists choose to compare China to the otherwise dissimilar US, they clearly seek to depict themselves *to themselves* as a superpower. Upward comparisons, psychologists have shown, serve to inspire self-improvement (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). This helps explain why many Chinese nationalists obsessively compare China to America. Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ argument likely created a sensation among numerous Chinese nationalists less out of their stated opposition to his view of a Confucian threat to the West than out of a secret delight that Westerners like Huntington feel threatened by China. Writing in Beijing’s influential *Reading* magazine, for instance, Li Shen zhi argued that China ‘should take Huntington’s perspectives seriously because they represent a kind of deep [racial] fear’ (Li Shen zhi, 1997). Huntington’s argument is celebrated because it confirms Chinese nationalists’ claims to great power status.

Conversely, those who reject Chinese claims to greatness are despised. For instance, the late Gerald Segal (1999) relegated China to 'middling power' status in a 1999 *Foreign Affairs* article. He promptly drew the ire of the *Beijing Review*'s most prominent nationalist, Li Haibo (1999), who retorted that 'Chinese feel insulted when their strength is underestimated'. In sum, it is only comparisons with salient others that will generate competition. Specifically, those others must be external and desirable objects of comparison.

Second, *what* do we compare? The object of comparison must be *consequential* to the self-concept for it to induce competition. As sociologist Charles Cooley (1922 [1902]: 266) has noted, it is only when the injurious thought we impute to another is 'regarding something which *we cherish as part of our self*' (emphasis added) that anger is awakened. What we compare is determined by what we care about; we will not compete over things that do not matter to us.

Language is a consequential issue because it is central to national identity. Fearing that English is a threat to the Chinese language, some Chinese nationalists compete over it. In a 1996 letter printed in the *Beijing Legal News*, for instance, one man complained about Chinese employees of foreign companies speaking with him in English. Restaurant menus, to add insult to injury, sometimes put English first and list their prices in US dollars — 'It's a disgrace!' (*Beijing Legal News*, 1996). Such popular anger has even found public expression. In the spring of 1996, legislation was proposed in the National People's Congress that would eliminate the 'poison' of foreign words from the Chinese language (*Xinhua*, 1996). That fall, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs suspended English interpreting at its press conferences, thereby demanding that all foreign journalists learn Chinese.¹⁵ We compete when the object of comparison is consequential to our self-concept.

When the object of comparison is inconsequential to our self-concept, however, there is no need to compete. As Marilyn Brewer (1999: 435) notes,

As long as the ingroup feels superior on dimensions that are important to the group's identity, members can tolerate or acknowledge outgroup superiority on dimensions of lesser importance. But when groups hold common values and adopt a common measure of relative worth, the search for positive distinctiveness becomes competitive.

Sino-American relations in the 1970s reveal a pair of examples of the former dynamic of tolerance. Although Nixon and Kissinger had been working hard toward establishing diplomatic relations with China in the early 1970s, Zhou Enlai stole credit for the breakthrough with a brilliant gambit —

inviting a US ping-pong team to China. Because few Americans cared much about ping-pong, defeat was inconsequential to them. For those Chinese who care greatly about their national game, however, victory must have been satisfying. This may have helped Mao and Zhou sell their about-face on policy toward the 'American imperialists' to the Chinese people. Deng Xiaoping then returned the favor in 1979, inviting an American basketball team to Beijing as part of the normalization of diplomatic relations. Although the 'world champion' Washington Bullets' victory over the Chinese national team (with their huge center, Mu) was enormously satisfying to this young American basketball fan, at the time few Chinese likely cared much about losing a game of basketball.¹⁶ In other words, because these two sports competitions were only consequential to one side, they did not promote intergroup competition. One side could gain collective self-esteem without threatening the other.

Third and finally, *how* is the comparison framed? Is the social comparison construed in *zero-sum* or positive-sum terms? Zero-sum comparisons induce competition. Such is the case whenever an issue is perceived as a question of status. As a matter of relative ranking, status is a zero-sum resource.¹⁷ This makes the quest for greater status highly competitive.

In China, status issues are often discussed in the language of *face*. The zero-sum nature of face and China's history of victimization at the hands of the West combine to make many contemporary Chinese view diplomacy as a fierce competition between leaders who win or lose face for the nations they embody. Chinese nationalist depictions of Richard Nixon, for example, reveal a zero-sum view of Sino-American relations. Ironically, many of the same Chinese nationalists who adore Kissinger also revel in humiliating Nixon — to the same ends of enhancing their national self-esteem at America's expense. They delight, for instance, in constructing 'victories' over Nixon at the United Nations in 1971 and at Beijing Airport in 1972. Although Nixon and Kissinger clearly desired rapprochement with the PRC and greater Chinese involvement in world affairs to balance against the Soviet Union,¹⁸ recent Chinese narratives of the PRC's 1971 entry into the UN ignore such geopolitics to depict the events in Manichean terms — China's victory was America's loss. An October 1996 *People's Daily* article, for instance, commemorates the 25th anniversary of the 'restoration' of the PRC's UN seat with the lines — 'The resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority . . . thunderous applause burst out in the assembly hall . . . and many could not refrain from dancing. . . . Certain people of course felt very embarrassed' (Fu, 1996). The popular 1996 history *The Sino-American Contest* is both more explicit about who these 'certain people' are and more creative in describing their 'embarrassment'. One photograph shows the UN General Assembly scene in October 1971

accompanied by the caption, 'Delegates applauded heartily, and America was utterly discomfited.' Chapter 3, 'Feeling Proud and Elated at the UN', elaborates on American 'impotence', 'humiliation', and 'anger'. American impotence is conveyed by asserting American opposition and then denying American actors agency to highlight the actions of China's 'chin up and chest out' delegation. The authors 'quote' then American Ambassador to the UN, George Bush, 'despondently' admitting that 'this was a loss of *face*' for the US. Construed American anger at this humiliation, however, is revealed in an even more fanciful portrayal of Nixon's reaction to the UN vote, which he apparently watched, 'still hoping for a miracle', on television in the White House library — 'The room was perfectly quiet. Nixon burned with anger, and the blue veins on his forehead protruded suddenly. "Unbelievable! . . . to perform so poorly at an international forum"' (Chen Feng et al., 1996: 12). Although the authors of *The Sino-American Contest* are researchers at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think-tank under the State Security Bureau (China's equivalent of the FBI), I suspect that this detailed description of the White House scene is less a product of Chinese intelligence gathering than of the authors' fertile imaginations. They project their view of the situation on to Nixon — because *face* is a zero-sum game, China's win must be America's loss, and American humiliation at defeat is represented in Nixon's red-faced fury.

Recent Chinese accounts of the 1972 handshake between Nixon and Zhou Enlai also depict the event as a zero-sum competition over status. In a special 1996 issue of *Love Our China*, for example, three PLA writers revel in humiliating Nixon to elevate Zhou and China. Chapter 1 is triumphantly entitled, 'Nixon Put His Hand Out First'. Although handshakes are usually understood to signify conciliation, the authors clearly interpret 'the handshake' as a Chinese victory. A tone of pride and vanity permeates their ensuing discussion of Nixon's further humiliation upon discovering no red carpet or masses awaiting at Beijing Airport: 'Nixon had hoped for cheering crowds. This plain and simple welcoming made Nixon think of the American opinion poll which had predicted that he would be ridiculed and fall into a trap when he visited China' (Yu Shaohua et al., 1996: 12). The authors clearly delight in imagining Nixon's chagrin.

When framed as an issue of relative status or *face*, therefore, Sino-American relations come to approximate the winner-takes-all world of Hobbesian realism. As one Chinese pundit recently lamented about much of the current wave of nationalist writings, 'a "zero-sum" mentality holds that America's gains (or losses) are China's losses (or gains)' (Wang Yuesheng, 1997: 131). Such zero-sum comparisons promote competition.

In sum, when international comparisons are made with salient foreign nations, are consequential and are framed in zero-sum terms, competition may ensue. The absence of any one of these three conditions, however, will inhibit competition.

Causes Sufficient to Prevent Intergroup Competition

The presence of any one of five additional psychological processes, furthermore, is sufficient *by itself* to inhibit a competitive outcome. These fall under two headings — social mobility and social creativity. Social mobility refers to the option of ‘exit’ from a threatened or negative social identity. One can, for example, seek upward social mobility by dis-identifying with a low-status group in favor of identification with a high-status group.

Chinese nationalists often seem acutely sensitive to the temptations of ‘exit’ from their national identity. In the spring of 1999, the *China News Digest’s* US service (CND-US), a Listserv providing news for the Mainland Chinese community in America, printed a letter from Zheng Anderson, a Chinese-Canadian, who wrote of being mistreated by an INS agent in Detroit Airport. ‘I have lived in Canada for 14 years and . . . have treated Canada as my home’, she writes. But ‘despite all the hard work I have done to contribute to my community and my country [Canada] . . . I am still regarded as Chinese’ (Anderson, 1999). The next issue of CND-US contained four responses to the posting. Two were supportive of Anderson’s anger with the INS and its discrimination against Chinese. The other two, however, accused her of social mobility, or ‘exit’. Li Jie asks,

Is she ashamed of BEING a Chinese? I think that this experience should teach her a lesson not to think that she is superior to her own people. She is always a Chinese no matter how many years she has been a Canadian citizen. (Li Jie, 1999)

Guo Danqun surmises from her name that Anderson is likely married to a ‘non-Chinese’ and then similarly asserts that she has an attitude of ‘supremacy over other Chinese’ (Guo, 1999). Chinese like Li and Guo reject the option of exit from their national identity.

Like such social mobility, social creativity militates against social comparison processes leading to intergroup competition. In general, social creativity involves the reframing of comparisons that threaten one’s collective self-esteem into comparisons that allow for positive distinctiveness. Tajfel and Turner (1986: 19–20) suggest that social creativity can take three forms — (a) introducing a more favorable dimension of comparison, (b) changing the values assigned to the attributes and (c) changing the target of comparison. I add a fourth — (d) self-deception.

First, when comparisons are framed along a single zero-sum dimension they can lead to head-to-head competition. However, if a new and more significant dimension of comparison is introduced, the comparison can generate positive distinctiveness for the ingroup, thus diffusing competition. Rather than compare our inferior X_1 to their superior X_2 , the framework is tweaked — 'They may be good at X , but we are good at Y — and Y is more important'. Chinese Occidentalism is full of examples of this first type of social creativity. For example, in their 1997 psycho-autobiography, *The Spirit of the Fourth Generation*, the authors of the 1996 hits *China Can Say No* and *China Can Still Say No* juxtapose 'Western materialism' to 'Eastern harmony' and Western 'impersonal coldness' to Eastern 'warm-heartedness'. They then borrow from Max Weber to argue that although Western materialism is ascendant, it is an iron cage — it is Easterners who have made 'the greater contribution to humanity' (Song et al., 1997: 246–9). Such 'othering' of America may seem self-indulgent, but because it creates positive distinctiveness for China, it militates against direct competition.

A second type of social creativity involves what Nietzsche called the 'transvaluation of values' — a 'negative' attribute is changed into a 'positive' one, or vice-versa. The 'Black is Beautiful' Movement in the US is an example of how social creativity can resolve threats to collective self-esteem — activists successfully argued that 'Black' was not ugly or evil, as they believed that social convention held, but beautiful. A letter published in the *Canton Evening News* in 1998 provides a parallel example of this process involving the valuation of the very term 'Chinese'. The author, an irate Chinese residing in the US, argues that Americans use the word 'Chinese' as a 'racial epithet'. As evidence, he cites an experience he had in Cincinnati when a homeless person taunted him with the words, 'Chinese, Chinese'. He therefore advocates reverting to the Sinocentric '*Zhongguoren*', literally 'person from the Middle Kingdom', rather than use the 'pejorative' English word 'Chinese'. In his mind's eye, this act would restore Chinese to their proper position of superiority.¹⁹ A more consequential example of this second form of social creativity is the recent Mainland Chinese re-evaluation of the Confucian tradition. Lambasted under Mao as 'feudal' and 'backwards', nationalists now praise Confucianism as the heart of China's glorious Civilization. Its meaning transvalued, 'Confucianism' now bolsters rather than threatens the national self-esteem of Chinese cultural nationalists.

A third form of social creativity involves changing the comparison target — switching from a higher to a lower status outgroup allows for a more favorable comparison. Downward comparisons, psychologists have shown, enhance self-esteem, especially under conditions of threat (e.g. Wills, 1991). In 'Rewriting China's Rules of the Game', for instance, nationalist Li Fang first speaks soberly about continued Western hegemony — 'The West's

power is shaken, but its control of the game has not.' He then finds solace by shifting to a more favorable target of comparison — China's 'ancient neighbors', Li writes, worshipped China as 'elegant and poised' and 'just and fair'. 'They found glory in drawing close to China; and feared distancing themselves from China and reverting to ignorance' (Li Fang, 1996: 23). This downward comparison (to China's East Asian neighbors) seems to cheer Li up, relieving his earlier anger against the West. Changing the object of comparison can diffuse the competitive impulse.

To Tajfel and Turner's three types of social creativity, I add a fourth — self-deception. Social comparison is made along a single dimension, the standards of 'good' and 'bad' are not challenged, and the target of comparison does not change. Instead, the perception of each party's relative standing is simply distorted. For all their disagreements, social psychologists share the belief that man actively interprets his social environment. They thus follow Kant, who argued that we do not see things as they 'are', but actively construct our universe (Kant, 1998 [1781]; Taylor, 1998: 52, 70). In their desire to see China triumph over America, for example, Chinese nationalists often confuse description and prescription — what is and what ought to be are conflated. Because of the lengthy history of the WTO talks, trade has become an issue of status in Sino-American relations. Therefore, Chinese nationalists who wish that China's economy was stronger than America's often simply assert that it is. For instance, the authors of *Surpassing the USA* assert that America is dependent on the Chinese economy: 'If America drops out of the China market . . . the blow to America would be huge and unprecedented.' Americans, they write, 'cannot do without Chinese products 24 hours-a-day' (Xi and Ma, 1996: 231, 228). This mistaken view of American economic dependence on China is remarkably widespread, laments China Economics and Trade University's Chong Ling (1996). In a broader critique, PLA writer Jin Hui depicts 1990s Chinese nationalists as suffering from an 'Ah Q style blind optimism'. Ah Q is the protagonist of a modern Chinese novel famous for his talent for turning defeats into psychological victories.²⁰ 'For over 100 years', Jin writes, 'generation after generation of Chinese have been dreaming that since we were once strong, although we are now backwards we will certainly become strong again.' Such 'illusions', he warns, are 'even worse than spiritual opiates' (Jin Niu, 1996b: 186–7). However delusional, such Ah Q-style self-deception has the positive side-effect of diminishing the threat of direct social comparison, reducing the likelihood of a competitive outcome.

Any one of these five psychological processes, in sum, is sufficient by itself to prevent intergroup comparisons from generating competition.

5. Sino-American Apology Diplomacy, 1999 and 2001

A comparison of two recent episodes of Sino-American apology diplomacy illustrates how SIT can inform our understanding of Chinese foreign policy.

At midnight on 8 May 1999, an American B-2 bomber dropped five precision guided missiles over Belgrade. All five hit their intended target. But it was not a Serbian arms depot — it was the Chinese Embassy. Three Chinese were killed in the blast; 23 others were injured. In Washington, President Bill Clinton proclaimed the bombing a 'tragic mistake' due to outdated maps and extended his 'regrets and profound condolences' to the Chinese people. In Beijing, however, Chinese officials rejected American explanations as 'sophistry', and declared NATO apologies to be 'insufficient' and 'insincere'. The Chinese media did not publicize Clinton's public apologies until 11 May. Instead, they proclaimed the bombing a 'barbaric' and intentional 'criminal act' (*Ta Kung Pao*, 1999).

After lengthy negotiations, Beijing and Washington agreed on compensation packages for both sides. When money finally changed hands nearly two years later in January 2001, however, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao again demanded that the United States 'conduct a comprehensive and thorough investigation into the bombing, severely punish the perpetrators and give satisfactory account of the incident to the Chinese People' (Kyodo, 2001).

A few months later, on 1 April 2001, a Chinese F-8 jet fighter and an American EP-3 surveillance plane collided over the South China Sea. The EP-3 made it safely to China's Hainan Island; the F-8 tore apart and crashed, and Chinese pilot Wang Wei was killed. A few days later, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan and President Jiang Zemin demanded an American apology. The Americans balked — viewing the aggressiveness of the Chinese jet as the cause of the collision, they did not feel responsible. As Senator Joseph Lieberman said on CNN's 'Larry King Live', 'When you play chicken, sometimes you get hurt' (CNN, 2001).

The impasse was only broken after 11 days of intensive negotiations. American Ambassador Joseph Prueher gave a letter to Foreign Minister Tang: 'Please convey to the Chinese people and to the family of pilot Wang Wei that we are very sorry for their loss . . . We are very sorry the entering of China's airspace and the landing did not have verbal clearance' (CNN.com, 2001). Having extracted an 'apology' from Washington, Beijing released the 24 American servicemen being held on Hainan Island.

What accounts for the willingness of Chinese and American leaders to choose confrontation over these two issues? And why does the 1999 affair

remain officially unresolved, while the 2001 incident has largely been settled?

Rationalist and symbolic approaches to IR provide complementary — not competing — answers to these questions. Specifically, rationalist approaches highlight the instrumental stakes involved, while SIT proves indispensable to answering the questions of why and when Chinese and Americans chose to compete, and why and when they chose not to.

I have discussed the Chinese reaction to the Belgrade bombing at length elsewhere (Gries, 2001). Here, suffice it to say that with the mid-1990s' re-emergence of a victimization narrative of Chinese suffering at the hands of Western imperialism, most Chinese understood the Belgrade bombing as yet another in a long history of Western insults. Chinese thus experienced the bombing as an assault on their collective self-esteem as 'Chinese'.

Official Chinese refusals to accept apologies from President Clinton in 1999 thus had both instrumental and emotional dimensions. Chinese and American diplomats were jockeying for position in post-Cold War East Asia. A rationalist analysis of post-Belgrade bombing Chinese diplomacy would rightly point to an instrumental motive — restoring China's position in the East Asian hierarchy of power.

But social identity was also a big part of the problem. All three of the necessary conditions for competition were present. America, as noted above, is a highly *salient* peer competitor against whom Chinese define their national identity. Had it been the Serbs that had mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy, Chinese would not have been as distraught. The death of three Chinese was obviously a *consequential* issue, and because status is a *zero-sum* resource, post-Belgrade bombing diplomacy was primed for competition. Furthermore, none of the five conditions that can prevent competition was readily available. The bombing was clearly a Sino-American issue, so social mobility was not an option. And the death of three Chinese was not something that any amount of social creativity could easily explain away.

Both rationalist and social psychological variables thus help explain why Chinese diplomats were unable to resolve the Belgrade bombing incident through cool diplomacy — the instrumental stakes were too high, and the assault on Chinese self-esteem was too acute. Popular nationalists had taken to the streets in protest, and Chinese diplomats were forced to take a public posture of rejecting American apologies and explanations. Like a father refusing his son's repeated prostrations of forgiveness, rejecting America's repeated apologies was one of the few ways China's leadership could seek to restore Chinese self-esteem in the eyes of the Chinese people.

The apology diplomacy that followed the 2001 plane collision incident was both similar and different. From a rationalist perspective, 2001, like

1999, threatened China's instrumental goal of advancing its position in post-Cold War East Asia. On the symbolic side, 2001 was also similar to 1999 in that all three necessary conditions for intergroup competition were present — once again, Chinese understandably framed the comparison with the US in salient, consequential and zero-sum terms.

The crucial difference between 1999 and 2001, however, seems to have been that in 2001 both sides were able to utilize social creativity to diffuse Sino-American competition. Specifically, although the incident clearly harmed both the US and China, hawks on both sides engaged in Ah Q-style self-deception over the meaning of the two 'very sorry' letters to declare victory. Cross-cultural differences in responsibility assessment and the meaning of apologies help explain how both sides could simultaneously claim victory (see Gries and Peng, 2002). Chinese tend towards a consequentialist view of responsibility. A Chinese pilot, Wang Wei, was dead, so an American apology was necessary to restore the relationship. Americans, in contrast, tend to focus on intentionality in assessing responsibility, hence our legal distinctions, for instance, between first and second degree murder. Was the act premeditated? Because Americans viewed the incident as a 'tragic accident' — not something Americans chose to do or did with premeditation — no apology was necessary.

The intensive negotiations over the wording of the letter Ambassador Prueher gave to Prime Minister Tang reflected these cultural differences. Chinese were able to claim that Americans had admitted responsibility for the incident, while Americans could claim that the two 'I'm sorrys' were mere gestures of condolence — not admissions of culpability. As Secretary of State Colin Powell (2001) explained after the release of the American crew, 'There is nothing to apologize for. To apologize would have suggested that we have done something wrong or accepted responsibility for having done something wrong. And we did not do anything wrong.'

Hawks on both sides were adept at *face*-saving self-deception. In Beijing, many boasted of how President Jiang had planned America's humiliation from the start, and had 'taught Bush Jr. a lesson'. Qinghua University's Yan Xuetong, for instance, declared that 'China stuck to principle' and 'did a better job of dealing with the incident' (Yan, 2001). In this Chinese view, Jiang, 'diplomatic strategist extraordinaire', had won a major diplomatic victory (Lam, 2001). In Washington, meanwhile, Bush was widely praised for having handled the situation masterfully, winning the day. For instance, the 'Nelson Report' (2001) circulated a parody of the American 'we're sorry' letter — 'We're sorry the world is now seeing your leaders as the xenophobic, clueless thugs that they really are. We're sorry you are losing so much *face* over this.'²¹ Ironically, it was such Ah Q-style self-deception on both sides that helped to diffuse the 2001 crisis.

In sum, SIT can help explain both similarities and differences in how Chinese diplomats responded to the 1999 and 2001 incidents. I have *not*, however, tested rationalist against symbolic hypotheses; both realms are integral to explaining the resolution of each incident.

6. Conclusions: Identity and Conflict in International Affairs

Drawing on experimental findings in social psychology, I have argued that our basic human tendency to identify with groups and imbue them with positive meaning does not inevitably lead to competition between groups. It is only when comparisons are made with salient others, are consequential and are framed in zero-sum terms that competition may ensue. Each of these three conditions is a necessary, but not sufficient, cause of competition. Furthermore, each of five forms of social mobility and social creativity is sufficient on its own to inhibit against a competitive outcome. Intergroup competition, in sum, is a highly contingent outcome.

International competition is no different. Although we all, to varying degrees, assimilate ourselves into our national groups and favor our fellow nationals over foreigners, we do not invariably pit our nations against other nations. Anti-foreignism is neither in our blood nor hardwired into our psyches. International competition is not — as Mercer (1995) suggests — the inexorable product of our identification with national groups. Fearon and Laitin's (1996) quantitative findings on the relative *non-occurrence* of ethnic conflict support this argument.

Assuming that competition precedes conflict, this article has focused on the transition from ingroup positivity to intergroup competition, the second and third stages of the four-stage model of the progression from ingroup identification to intergroup conflict. It has not, therefore, said much about the equally contingent transition between intergroup competition and intergroup conflict, stages three and four. Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin (1998) are right that this transition is a 'phase shift' — it is not a change in degree, but a change in kind demanding separate theoretical attention.

I disagree with Brubaker and Laitin (1998: 438), however, when they assert that psychological theories cannot account for aggression. Just as I located comparison at the juncture between ingroup positivity and intergroup competition (stages two and three), I suggest that emotion lies at the juncture between intergroup competition and conflict (stages three and four).²² I thus join Mercer (1996) and Neta Crawford (2000) in calling for emotion to be brought back into the study of IR. The psychologies and sociologies of emotion in particular can teach us a great deal about when international competition will lead to war — and when it will not.

Although a persuasive case for the pivotal role of affect in transforming

competition (stage three) into violent conflict (stage four) requires separate treatment, a brief discussion of one specific emotion — anger — is warranted here to defend psychology from Brubaker and Laitin's critique. Anger can restore status after it has been taken away unfairly. It 'seems designed to rectify injustice', one group of psychologists writes — 'to reassert power or status, to frighten the offending person into compliance, to restore a desired state of affairs' (Shaver et al., 1987: 1078). In *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, Barrington Moore (1978: 17) similarly argues that 'vengeance means retaliation. It also means a reassertion of human dignity or worth, after injury or damage. Both are basic sentiments behind moral anger and the sense of injustice.' Where Moore highlights the emotional, J.M. Barbalet (1998: 136) stresses the instrumental — 'Vengefulness is an emotion of power relations. It functions to correct imbalanced or disjointed power relationships. Vengefulness is concerned with restoring social actors to their rightful place in relationships.' Anger can thus simultaneously have *both* symbolic and instrumental dimensions. It is such ethical anger, I suggest, that can impel sustained conflict and violence.²³

Indeed, Chinese nationalists frequently speak of injustice. Xiong Lei, for instance, writes in 1997's passionate anti-American bestseller, *The Plot to Demonize China*, that 'we do not seek to foment hatred of Americans, only to restore justice' (Li and Liu, 1996: 83). The Chinese who threw bricks at the US Embassy in Beijing after the bombing of their embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 were also impelled by an ethical anger that sought to right a wrong. They were genuinely angry — not, as Western pundits generally suggested, playthings in the hands of communist puppet masters. Chinese protesters sought retributive justice — to restore China's proper place in international society (Gries, 2001). Righteous anger can impel intergroup competition into violent conflict.

In this paper I have attempted to advance the theoretic debate over conflict in IR by bringing in agency and contingency. Nations do not act; individuals act. Like all peoples, Chinese are neither innately pacifist nor hardwired for conflict. Instead, history and culture shape how individual Chinese will construe the events of world politics. The social psychology of intergroup relations can then help explain whether they will choose cooperation or conflict in a given situation. Sino-American relations in the 21st century, therefore, will *not* inevitably be conflictual. Individual agency plays a vital role. It is the actions of individual Chinese and Americans — both in the street and in the corridors of power — that will determine whether our need to view our nations positively will lead to Sino-American conflict. By suggesting which conditions promote intergroup conflict and which diffuse it, social identity theory (SIT) can help us learn to live together, in peace.

Notes

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1. Johnston makes valuable contributions in both debunking the myth of a pacifist Chinese strategic culture (Chinese can and do frequently use force) and by bringing culture into analysis. As Johnston himself notes, however, his approach to culture makes the same deterministic predictions about Chinese behavior as a 'simple structural realpolitik model' would (Johnston, 1995: xi).
2. My thanks to Rick Herrmann for the phrase 'primordial super realism'.
3. Although Wendt proposes a 'social structural' approach to IR, his view of the state is often surprisingly asocial — international society, he asserts, has a 'low density' because 'states are by nature more solitary than people'. This leads Wendt to pessimistically concede to the materialists that 'states are predisposed to define their objective interests in self-interested terms . . . the international system contains a bias toward "Realist" thinking'. On the other hand, Wendt is remarkably optimistic in asserting that the relationship among his three 'international political cultures' — Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian — is progressive, or at least 'unidirectional'. Such passages leave the reader wondering whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about interstate relations. Because his focus is on the macro, systemic level, Wendt can provide little insight into when specific states will spar (Wendt, 1999: 276, 21, 267, 241, 312).
4. Bruce Cronin also disagrees with Mercer's reading of SIT, but on different grounds. See Cronin (1999: 20–1).
5. Turner (1987) makes this point especially clear in an elaboration of SIT that he calls self-categorization theory.
6. Work on 'prototypes' in person perception also addresses this issue of the role of comparison processes in understanding our social world. See, e.g. Cantor and Mischel (1979).
7. Yu (1995). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Chinese are my own.
8. Of course, methodologically individualist social psychologists today would not anthropomorphize the state as Wendt has. Critical constructivists Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney go even further than Wendt, declaring that 'the deepest motivation for human contact is self-knowledge'. See Inayatullah and Blaney (1996: 81). I borrow 'critical constructivism' from Hopf (1998).
9. For a recent critique of the self-esteem literature, see Scheff and Fearon (2004).
10. Collective self-esteem was restored, however, if the subjects were subsequently allowed to derogate Russians. See Branscombe and Wann (1994).
11. Social psychologists have done a better job of *demonstrating* the existence of desires for ingroup positivity, however, than of *explaining* them.

12. Crocker and Luhtanen (1990: note 36). The exact nature of the relationship between personal and collective self-esteem is not yet clear, however.
13. See, e.g., the political science literature on relative deprivation. E.g. Gurr (1970).
14. In the modern period, indeed, Japan has arguably served as 'China's Occident'. See Gries (2004: 35–40).
15. Not all Chinese, of course, share this view of the English language. Linguist Chen Guanglei, for instance, has urged restraint. There is 'no need to either fear or worship the western', Chen councils. Chinese should 'absorb foreign words while maintaining self-respect and love of our own language'. See Chen Guanglei (1997: 21, 16).
16. Today's Chinese, of course, care much more about basketball. China now has its own professional basketball association, the CBA, and millions of aspiring Yao Mings.
17. The problem is one of inflation. If everyone gets 'A's', for example, an 'A' would lose its value. Manipulating status, furthermore, is very difficult. 'Located' in other people's minds, status is highly elusive. Attempting to buy or coerce status, for instance, is usually self-defeating, reducing one's prestige. Rather than being bought or bullied, status is instead earned through conformity to social norms and association with those of high status. See Milner (1994).
18. Rosemary Foot (1995) makes a persuasive case that the Nixon administration's formal opposition to Beijing's UN bid was half-hearted — they were going through the motions for the sake of Taiwan and domestic American opinion, which supported PRC entry but remained loyal to the Nationalists in Taiwan.
19. *Canton Evening News* (1998). My thanks to Regina Abrami for this clipping.
20. For a perceptive analysis of Ah Q's 'psychological victory technique', see Lu (1982).
21. My thanks to Rick Baum for this.
22. This is not meant to imply that emotion does not play a role in other intergroup dynamics. Indeed, sociologists of emotion make the broader argument that emotion is the vital link between social actor and social structure (e.g. Barbalet, 1998: 27). SIT and especially social categorization theory (SCT), however, have shied away from motivation in favor of a focus on the cognitive dimensions of intergroup behavior.
23. Moore and Barbalet's argument about anger seeking to restore status, intriguingly, overlaps with prospect theory's finding that we are more averse to loss than desirous of gain. Beyond just being angered by status loss, therefore, we are also more willing to take risks to restore it. On 'prospect theory', see Kahneman and Tversky (1979).

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