

Chinese Traditional Culture and its implications on Xi Jinping's National Security Strategy

Final Essay for the course of Security and Strategy

Topic: Influence of Strategic Culture on National Security Policy and Strategy with
reference to a selected country

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1. Introduction to China's security strategy and its related culture

National security strategy is one state's theory of how to achieve security for itself. And thus, security strategy culture related the context of the specific state.

In the book of *Strategic Power: United States of America and the U.S.S.R.*, Ken Booth define strategic culture to be a nation's traditional, values, attitudes, pattern of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force.¹ Similarly, Yassin, a Saudi scientist, reckons that strategic culture is "an intellectual environment that determines the behavioral choices of the nation in the field of war and peace. To be more specific, it is an integrated pattern of symbols, metaphors and linguistic trajectories describing enemies who may pose a threat to the state".² As such, the way nations conceive who may be a threat to it varies a lot.

However, when it comes to China, the Western framework has to be adjusted. The Western academic scholarships don't apply very well to China. The theoretical framework in either the US, UK or Europe often have many assumptions or areas of emphasis. Also, there are indeed a variety of instruments deployed internally and externally during decision making process with respect to national security, but actually the focus largely tends to be external and militarily centric in such discussions. In contrast, as a non-Western style democratic regime, where has the PRC enforced its coercive forces? More often or not, China's national security is easily translateable to state security or internal stability. Additionally, China seldom involves in hot war (except for the future conflicts with Taiwan). Instead, unconventional wars seem a better choice for China compared to the US.

Although China has a long history and a variety of culture source like Taoism, Confucianism, and Sunzi, not all the elements have been integrated into its strategic culture. More importantly, the CCP has long been updating, manipulating, and even distorting some of Chinese traditional cultures. Therefore, we should concentrate more on what the CCP have

¹ Ken Booth, "The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed", *"Strategic Power: United States of America and the U.S.S.R."*, 1990.

² Yassin, P., *Bezpieczeństwo narodowe w świetle teorii kultury strategicznej*. 2019.
<http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/364860.aspx>.

highlighted and what President Xi said to figure out China's national security policy.

2. Traitor and Chinese-characteristic national security

Given that China is a non-democracy society with one party system, discussions of civil military relations in nations like US or UK doesn't cover the whole range of national contexts in China. Instead, the Chinese regime often focuses way too much on internal security and potential internal enemy

During the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) on March 5, 2023, President Xi state that China must "have the courage to fight as the country faces profound and complex changes in both the domestic and international landscape"³. That means domestic stability is deemed as a part of national security. In other words, the spectrum of national security is widened by the CCP who claims that most of domestic opponents are controlled by or at least influenced by foreign countries. The party uses the term of foreign anti-China groups to describe almost all the dissents but most of them actually have no connection with any foreign institutions. The "anti-China" label obscures the delineation between the one who is merely against the party leader or public policy and another who poses a direct threat to the safety of ordinary Chinese people.

Controlled by one ruling party and red families, PRC has a lot in common with many dynastic states in ancient times. There is enough cases to look at since Song Dynasty, where the state was not sufficiently powerful to push back against invaders and had to make a decision between sticking to fight despite of how large numbers of people will die and propelling a compromise with adversary for recovery and strength build-up. In most of records within the Chinese context, those who were in favor of negotiation are always assessed as “漢奸” (traitors to China).

The labeling practice is a double-edged sword. For one thing, the nation can unite most of people for fighting against enemies if they indeed exist; for another, lack of tolerance for different voices may force genuine patriots to leave the nation. The latest example is Cai Xia, a member of CCP and former professor at the Chinese Central Party School. She advocated for constructive conversation with the United States and institutional reform in China. Moreover, she called the Party a “political zombie”⁴ under the General Secretary Xi, expecting someone in the inner circle to replace Xi so as to maintain the party's leadership for some years until peaceful transition to political liberalization. Not surprisingly, the Chinese Central Party School deprived her of the member of CCP and suspended her retirement pension. Enormous articles and comments emerged online in the mainland of China, denouncing Cai Xia as a traitor to the nation and the party. Later Cai Xia became an absolute opponent to the CCP and decided to stay in the U.S.

³ Xi Jinping. Speech on the First Session of the Fourteenth National People's Congress. March 13, 2023, Xinhua News Agency, http://www.news.cn/2023-03/13/c_1129430112.htm

⁴ Chu Bailiang. She Was a Communist Party Insider in China. Then She Denounced Xi. Oct 19, 2020. New York Times, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20200819/china-cai-xia-expelled-communist-party/dual/>.

3. Successful unification grants legitimacy to the ruling party

The relations between the PRC and Taiwan rose up and down in the last decades. Giving up the charm offensive diplomacy adopted by his predecessors, Xi Jinping administration becomes increasingly aggressive and belligerent, calling on Chinese military and citizens to be ready to conquer Taiwan. Admittedly, the idea that Taiwan is a part of China is one of core propaganda that the PRC is trying to feed the Chinese people but it is Xi Jinping who set up a much faster timeline to pursue reunification as a springboard to realize great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

By some observation, Xi will complete the reunification in his 3rd term. Why is Xi so obsessed about territorial integrity, or alleged territorial integrity by reunifying with Taiwan? One possible reason is that Xi is trying to legitimize his power and the monopoly of the ruling party. Though economic growth legitimized the party's supreme status in Jiang Zemin era and Hu Jintao era, it is unrealistic that any nation can maintain high growth rate as 8% every year. Xi has to defend his leadership through another argument when confronting economic recession, high unemployment rate and reduced personal income.

From historical perspective, "great rejuvenation" means that PRC under Xi's leadership will surpass most of dynasties in ancient China; "Great Unification" means "定於一尊" in Chinese context, namely the king have jurisdiction over a large territory, within which he takes total control of minorities and Vassal states who look up to him. Ancient China has Qin, Han, Tang, and Ming dynasty which mirror and match the ideal of Great Unification. Even in the chaotic warring period like Three Kingdoms after the collapse of 400-year Han Empire, Cao Cao who had unified the North of China couldn't promote himself as a king. His top advisor Xun Yu believed that Cao Cao didn't have "Mandate of Heaven" to justify his power of emperor, since he had been pushed back by Eastern Wu (東吳) in the Battle of Redcliff (赤壁之戰) and failed to rule over the South of China. Obviously, Xi Jinping is being trapped in the similar dilemma. Without Mandate of Heaven, Xi's rise to power in 2012 was a compromise between the Jiang and Hu factions - the two influential factions within the CCP. That is why Xi has desired to show his authority by realizing these grandiose intentions, great rejuvenation and unification.

In addition, the historical trajectory seems to reinforce the conviction that there is an external and united China. Three-Kingdom era and Warring State Period ultimately turned out to be replaced by a freshly new but unified nation through a series of annexation and negotiation. To go down this road further, we can see that Taiwan issue is indeed the byproduct of Chinese Civil War in 1940s between the Chinese Nationalist Party and Chinese Communist Party, each of which didn't allow the other to have complete control over China. To the CCP, unification with Taiwan means the CCP achieves the ultimate success. This success guarantees that no one will be able to debunk the disinformation and lies that CCP has long fed to Chinese people. That is the fact that it is CCP who defeated the Japan in the World War II instead of CNP.

However, the most negative result will come out if the PRC tries to conquer Taiwan but

eventually fail or overly elongate the time spent on military actions. That will put the lie to Xi's promise of unification and undermine his leadership within and outside the party. Even worse, the fact that Xi hasn't designated any successor will definitely immeasurably intensify situation where he has to transfer his power.

4. Middle Kingdom never embraces other cultures

Long history is a precious legacy but also might be a huge obstacle on the road to become a global player in modern international community. The characters of China is “中國” which can be directly translated into Middle Kingdom. In Chinese language, middle refers to center, namely the center of international community who is able to supervise rather than cooperate.

Early in the 19th century, China's policy makers treated Western science and technology as practical vehicles through which the country become rich and strong. The notion was summarized as “中體西用”, Chinese essence with Western practicalities. Having Pei Yang Squadron equipped, however, Qing Dynasty was miserably defeated by Japan in First Sino-Japanese War. This failure has proved that a highly centralized regime with unitary rule is indeed inconsistent with innovation and technology advancement. But it seems that President Xi turns a blind eye on such failures, which is demonstrated not only by the bankruptcy of Chip initiative but also by the counter-productiveness of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy.

Admittedly, the CCP doesn't consider democracy to be vital and effective for China. But Xi and his supporters should have a general understanding of some key concepts in American politics, like check and balance, freedom of the media, and transparency of government activities. In February when two Chinese surveillance balloons were hovering over the territory of the US, President Xi answered that he was personally unaware of the balloons prior to them, hoping that the Biden administration would downplay this incident. In response to it, Biden administration cancelled Secretary Blinken's trip to China, because Biden was pressed by American public opinion of feeling insecure and some Republicans who even urged Biden to push back against Xi's excuse promptly. It is fascinating to me that the PRC had tried to lower the temperature between the bilateral relation in the past few months and thus showed not being that belligerent towards the accusation from the US. That probably alludes that the reaction by Xi literally came out of his ignorance of American politics.

Another important feature of “Middle Kingdom” culture is to fear of losing face. The recent case happened on the eve of Singapore Security Conference. China rejected the invitation to meet with the US Secretary of Defense mainly because of the US sanction on the Chinese Defense Secretary, Li Shangfu. The CCP didn't want to show weakness in front of Chinese people. Furthermore, the PRC attempted to portray itself being more confident over the US, from which most of countries in the world seldom reject invitation. The indifference to the superpower will buy reputation among the Chinese little pink in the short term but it would be, in my view, China's loss that not to talk to the US. As many Western

scholars described, the US and China should talk, and the advantages for both sides, not just for the US, is obvious – to avoid miscommunication and miscalculation, to limit the risk of accidental confrontation, and to put a floor under the relationship.

If the PRC consistently didn't know, didn't want to know, or even pretended not to know what the Western politics operated, it would trigger more and more side effects opposite to what the Chinese leader wished.

5. Disparity between Confucianism in history and in the PRC

The strategic culture defines a set of patterns of and for a nation's behavior on war and peace issues. It helps shape but does not determine how a nation interacts with others in the security field.⁵ In addition, since the security strategy varies nation by nation, it would be better to avoid uncertainty when a nation predicts the way other nations respond to it. In other words, it is the strategic culture which shapes the evolution of security strategy in the long term. However, security strategy may also change as culture is not immutable over time or elements of culture can be selected or altered. Kuźniar criticized the strategic culture theory that "The main reason for frustration is the insufficient precision in identifying the connections between strategic culture and the strategy itself". Also, it should be noted that the direct impact of strategic culture on specific decisions and actions cannot be measured.

Confucian thought is well known in China and all over the world. Confucianism advocates that peacefulness is the priority and one should love strangers as his own family. But if the PRC is a true adherent of Confucianism, why has President Xi reinforced fighting spirit and baseline thinking? Xi is also ready to mobilize all the resources that the PRC has for the potential conflicts over any threats, to break apart the First Island stretching from Japan and Taiwan to Pacific islands, as well as to deter Taiwan by military coercion until it come back to PRC.

Let me talk about the origin of Confucianism. Confucius is a famous teacher, philosopher and political theorist. What I want to point out is that Confucius hadn't convinced any state to accept his political philosophy when he was active in lobbying at that time. 200 year later in the Han Dynasty, the Han government absorbed essence of Confucianism as its mainstream thought. According to Interactions Between Heaven and Mankind Theory (天人感應) redefined by Dong Zhongshu, one famous policy advisor for Emperor Wu Di, the ruler should be held accountable for his violation of the regulation and rules which constitute the pillars of Mandate of Heaven. As I mentioned above, Mandate of Heaven decides the legitimacy of a monarch, which explains why Wu Di is one of a very small group of emperors in ancient China who issued a special order on admitting mistakes he made and reproached himself publicly.

Confucius taught its processors to be credible about what they did. If Confucian thoughts

⁵ The same with 1.

are carried out outside the bureaucratic system, they can serve as a force to supervise what the government has done. Otherwise, Confucian would be just treated as a propaganda, being distorted by the government or the ruling class. To follow this road, it would be ironic that President Xi emphasized over and over again that the first three decades upon the nation is established must not be used to deny the second three decades, and vice versa. To put it simply, the period of openness and reform is not inconsistent with the period of Culture Revolution and planned economy.

6. The Art of War by Sunzi: unconventional wars

According to The Art of War, the best way to defeat an enemy is to use artifices; the second way is to use diplomacy; the third way is to start a war. Usage of ruses and artifices includes, which Chapter 5 of the book wrote, to join battle with conventional tactics, to achieve victory through unconventional tactics, to show the false to confuse the enemy, and to create momentum to harass the enemy.

China's civil-military fusion project is a good case. Many experts have discussed the project. A critical role of the project is the blur of delineation between China's civilian research and commercial sectors, and its military and defense industrial sectors. what the strategy wants to obtain is cutting-edge technologies but the way the CCP obtains the tech is much more relying on students, researchers and scientists it sends to the US rather than intelligence agents. Particularly, in recent 10 years, Chinese governments has been systematically targeting promising research in the United States, not only by taking advantage of students and researchers who come over to the US, but also by sending billions of dollars to American campuses for espionage. A fair number of institutions and researchers were targeted under the China Thousand Talents program and other recruitment programs. Examples include American researchers from Harvard's head of Chemistry Department to Cleveland Clinic research, and Chinese nationals from Liu Ruopeng who created a billion-dollar empire in China by copying invisibility technology in Duke University to the 35-year-old phd Wang Weibao who stole Apple's secrets for self-driving cars back to Jidu Auto.

Moreover, China's pursuing tech transfer is so intractable that it is hard for the US to decipher who's working to steal for the Communist Party, and who is just a student coming to America and learn. That's the reason why the US started to suspend or reject the visa access to international students. For example, Proclamation 10043 signed up by the former President Trump prohibits students in the PRC associated with the People's Liberation Army from obtaining F visas or J visas. But in reality, the proclamation denies a visa to someone who studied at a particular university like Harbin Institute of Technology, Beihang University, and Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, whether or not there is negative information about the individual.

The limitation of academic exchanges also brings about more problems than some expected. Since the number of student visas issued to Chinese nationals in 2022 reduced by over 50% than 2019, 86% of Chinese American scientists find it difficult to recruit

international students.⁶ In the short term, the US universities and colleges will suffer from tight budget due to lack of admission to Chinese students. From economic perspective, around 89% of all Chinese students abroad are self-funded. In the long term, Chinese STEM PhD graduates stay long upon graduation. Chinese and Indian students make up nearly half, and “most stay long after graduation”.⁷

The United States is a country built of immigrants but recently discrimination, hate speech and racial profiling rise from time to time. How does the superpower admit smart students, retain them and ensure them to ally with its economic and national interest, while reversely guarding against this issue of a potential espionage? That is exactly the key problem that the CCP is raising the US with.

7. Conclusion

Until 2015, China did not have a written national security strategy document. Xi Jinping was the 1st leader to issue or create such a document. In contrast to some common review, I argue that Xi Jinping's grand strategy is not so similar to his predecessors. Furthermore, the Chinese culture updated or manipulated under Xi's administration has departs from essences of Chinese traditional cultures. We should be vigilant against the fraud, the propaganda, the distortion of Chinese culture and their influence on security strategy of the PRC under Xi's leadership.

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⁷ The United States–China Economic and Security Review Commission (informally, the U.S.–China Commission, USCC) is an independent agency of the United States government. It was established on October 30, 2000, through the Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act.

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