

## China's Strategic Preferences

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Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995

RECEIVED opinion among students of China is that the Chinese state has a predisposition towards non-violent solutions to international disputes. War will be used reluctantly and only as a last resort. The common view in the 'China Field' is that China has inherited a 'strategic culture' which is enormously ancient and peculiarly its own. The expectation is that the Chinese will continue to be influenced in their strategic decisions by the *Seven Military Classics*, particularly the *Sun Zi Bing Fa*. Sun Zi (Sun Tzu in the older Romanisation) was the fourth-, fifth- or sixth-century BC author of *The Art of War* who has always been China's most quoted strategic thinker.

In *Cultural Realism*, Alastair Johnston, Assistant Professor of Government at Harvard University, confronts his fellow China specialists with the international-relations debate about 'realism' versus 'strategic culture', and turns round to confront realists with his own version of the concept of strategic culture in China, past and present. His complex text creates 'cognitive maps' of the Chinese military texts in order to decide whether they do reveal the existence of a uniform strategic culture and what its precise character may be. He then minutely tests the strategic decisions of Ming times to determine whether they conformed to the culture that he identifies.

The 'China Field' in which Johnston works tends to be self-referring because of the language requirement. It is also a little isolated from developments in social science, and is just as prone as the Chinese themselves to think that China is unique. There are few 'realists' and more than a dash of what Gerald Segal has called 'ethnic chic' (p.24). The impression given is that, despite Imperial China's repeated expansions, the country's strategic cultural legacy has been distinguished from the West's by the use of as little external military violence as possible. Johnston labels this culture 'Confucian-Mencian'. The stereotype is certainly that West and East differ in the degree to which they seriously follow the classics, as well as how they behave. Customary interpretations contrast a West purportedly devoted to the application of technology and offensive wars of annihilation with an East that affects stratagem, minimal violence and defensive warfare. A further supposition is a path-dependent one which assumes continuity from very early Chinese regimes right to the Communist dictatorships: that a minimalist approach has recreated itself through vast tracts of time. Chinese exceptionalism is a mark of the China Field, as exceptionalisms often are in area studies.

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### The Realist vs Strategic Culture Dichotomy

Johnston's contribution is marked by an unusual consciousness, for a China specialist, of the realist versus strategic culture dichotomy. Rather than automatically adopting his own field's stance, he seeks to decide between these two grand streams of interpretation. This is a crucial matter. The dichotomy is an aspect of the underlying schism in the social sciences between deduction and induction: between what are now called rational-choice models and interpretations dependent on the legacy of history and the operational independence of culture. This watershed has spilled protagonists down either side several times in the evolution of many of the social sciences. A prominent instance was the clash over economic anthropology between Frank Knight and Melville Herskovits in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1941 (reprinted in Herskovits, 1965). Knight urged the general applicability of economic theory while Herskovits rejected it as inappropriate for 'primitive' societies. In the 1960s, this discord was to re-emerge as a struggle between the formalists, who were committed to the universality of economic theory, and the substantivists, often followers of Karl Polanyi, equally committed to the individuality of cultures. The literature is reviewed by Dalton (1971).

The spirit of this protean, apparently inexhaustible, debate reappears to this day in attacks on economic analysis, which in Australia take the form of disparagement of so-called 'economic rationalism'. Part of the charge is that economics is only mock-universal, attempting to project over the whole world the net of a theory designed to analyse malign Western capitalism and incapable of doing more than that. Lately, economists have been ignoring these attacks, thinking them so poorly formulated as to be beyond falsification: 'not even wrong'. Typically, during the intervals between battles, social scientists of both dispositions remain rhetorically contemptuous of the other view but do not engage with recognisable versions of it. They stay in their own departments and socialise their students in near-isolation. However, serious debate has resurfaced with the rise of the new institutional economics (Basu et al., 1987). More recently still it has erupted as a vehement, not to say vitriolic, dispute over the respective merits of rational choice models and area studies' approaches in explaining the East Asian miracle, particularly the case of Japan (Johnson & Keehn, 1994; Tullock, 1994). The debate is thus currently alive in international relations, though not in the China Field — to which *Cultural Realism* now extends it.

Realists take the state as the functional unit and assume that its rulers will seek always to optimise its utility, mostly defined as power though sometimes as resources. This position ignores constraints imposed by 'nonobjective' variables, including the legacy of the past. Although the insistence on ahistorical and acultural rationality is occasionally relaxed, according to Johnston this happens only ad hoc (pp. 2-3). Ordinarily, any competent elite is expected to make similar choices in the presence of a given set of options, being guided solely by calculation of what would maximise the national interest.

Johnston objects to this reasoning. He decides that it cannot explain the periods of considerable stability evident in the history of the international system. It is unable to account for variations in offensive behaviour by states all of which are *ex hypothesi*

aggressive but not all of which are permanently constrained by stronger neighbours or alliances among their weaker ones. Think, for example, of each Chinese empire at its height. The adjacent, settled states were little threat, either individually or in any plausible combination. Nor were the steppe nomads on the landward side constant in their menace, absorbing the imperial attention and resources all of the time. Yet the empires did not push outwards unceasingly.

Johnston thus believes that realism is inadequate and its exponents inconsistent. In any case, he decides that China was not realist but possessed and possesses its own strategic culture. Whatever precise form this concept assumes, it posits a stable ranking of grand strategic preferences derived from shared, central assumptions about the nature of conflict and enemy states. Johnston's study of the topic is a rigorously, even relentlessly, systematic exercise in political science conceived as dealing with ideas and trends. Oddly, although he acknowledges that the limitations of rational choice are occasionally attributed to 'the eccentric characteristics of particular leaders' (p. 3), he does not consider the theoretical status of the individual. This seems anomalous in view of the role attributed to Sun Zi and the pertinence of examining Mao Zedong in the light of a Great Man theory of history. Scholars concerned with history and culture might be expected to be sensitive to individual influences and not limited to studying aggregates.

### Strategic Culture as *Parabellum*

Johnston is, however, methodologically too self-conscious to take the existence of strategic culture on trust. He probes its depths. Moreover, he attempts to establish whether the culture he identifies was and is of the soft type descended from Confucius and Mencius, as the China Field supposes. He concludes that it was instead a type of *Realpolitik* for which he coins the term '*parabellum*'. This hard *Realpolitik* proposes that the best way of dealing with threats to security is to eliminate them by force. It is important to note that Johnston does not assert other states had or have a softer approach than this, and refrains from singling China out as a specially dangerous would-be aggressor. In order that the comparative situation may be established, he calls for as careful an examination of the strategic culture of other states as his own of China. His is a work of scholarship in political science and Chinese history, not an exercise in 'China-bashing'. Nevertheless, he eventually turns from the Ming, bringing his findings to bear on the foundations of policy in modern China and therefore on the expectations we should hold.

The sources that Johnston uses in the body of his work are the Chinese military classics. The greatest of these is undeniably the *Sun Zi Bing Fa*. 'To live in Chinese culture', says a current reviewer of the section on military technology in the vast Needham encyclopaedia, 'is to cherish martial stratagem. Chinese soldiers and civilians actually read Sun Tzu, printed in affordable paperback editions with learned explanatory notes' (Sage, 1997:157, emphasis in original). The same writer notes the paradox that Western readers are seldom familiar with their long heritage of military literature whereas the Chinese, with few *Bingshu* or military texts to fall back on, cherish Sun Zi's ancient, towering text. The prescriptions so well known to the Chinese thus de-

rive to an exceptional extent from one reading of one dominating historical work. Its advice comes in the form of aphorisms which, however incisive, are harder to see as one piece than narratives in which the nuances are already smoothed into connected wholes. Nevertheless, some familiarity with the work is essential to understanding China's martial strategy, though perhaps more the debate around it than the strategy itself.

Johnston shows that the usual reading of non-violence in *The Art of War* is incomplete and that it actually sanctions a resort to violence whenever lower-cost approaches fail. For Sun Zi, the key issue was not the necessity of avoiding bloodshed but knowing *when* to fight. Additionally, Johnston shows just how violent China's historical responses to conflict have been in practice. He shows this himself for the Ming and for recent times cites data provided in Jonathan Wilkenfeld et al. (1988) to show that China has been far more prone than other major powers to use violence in disputes over security. In modern disputes over territorial claims, China resorted to violence in 80 per cent of the cases. The alarm which this may inspire is somewhat lessened by noting that the number of cases was only five, though Chinese leaders apparently do define even diplomatic crises as ones of high threat in which force would be a legitimate response.

Were the implied emphasis on non-violence in *The Art of War* a correct reading, it might give China the appearance of being militarily unthreatening but would scarcely render policy towards that country any easier to devise. The behaviour that Sun Zi actually advocates is calculating and sly: outwit the enemy using deception and surprise. Prosecute wars of morale and intelligence. 'The best policy is to take a state intact' (Griffith, 1963:ix, 39). Yet it is not never to fight, merely to employ cheaper strategies whenever possible.

The core message taken from, or read into, Sun Zi is to look strong when weak, weak when strong. This has even entered the syllabuses of Western business schools, not only or mainly as an aid to competing in the Chinese market but as a guiding principle. Hence *The Art of War* may be found alongside derivative works with titles like *The Art of Business*, *The Art of War in Contemporary Business Management*, and *Sun Tzu's Art of War and Strategy's Relevance for Construction Project Management*. As for the military, they have always studied Sun Zi. The Japanese took up the Chinese military classics as early as the Onin War in the 15th century, learning (as a history of Japan is quoted as saying) 'not so much the principles of war as the dirtiest form of statecraft with its unspeakable depths of duplicity. The most cynical, the very worst passages in the notorious Eighteenth Chapter of *The Prince*, pale before the naked and full-bodied depravity of the old Chinese lore on espionage' (Griffith, 1963:172). Although young Nationalist Chinese officers thought *The Art of War* outdated by mechanised warfare in the 1930s, Mao Zedong, who after all beat them, was impressed.

'The supreme art of war', wrote Sun Zi, 'is to subdue the enemy without fighting' (Griffith, 1963:vii). Yet looking strong when weak, weak when strong, is a Catch-22. States adhering to it must inevitably appear threatening. There must for instance always seem to be a 'China Threat', because, whenever there appears to be none, other

countries must presume that China is merely shamming. The policy response would have to be a perpetual set of blocking actions and jockeyings for advantage, just what realists expect the world to be like. Ironically, Sun Zi can in this way be interpreted in a realist mode, even though he gave rise to a strategic-cultural tradition.

Readings are one thing, behaviours may be another. May not *The Art of War* be little more than a symbolic classic, a shared heritage, quoted selectively for garnishing or to rationalise some chosen course of action? Does *any* cultural artefact really determine strategic preferences, and do these preferences in turn decide actual strategic choices? Johnston plunges far back into these anterior issues and attempts to establish their precise meanings.

The 'realist' school in international relations would be happy with a Catch-22 reading of Sun Zi, and even happier, no doubt, with the axiomatic view of violence that Johnston quotes from Zhao Benxue's Ming dynasty annotation of the text. Zhao claimed that, 'because between heaven and earth there are people, therefore there is conflict. Because there is conflict, therefore there is chaos. Because chaos cannot be ordered, therefore there is warfare' (p. 186). To realists, states are always potential aggressors, constrained only by the structural context, which is to say the absence of opportunity that comes from the strength of others holding them in check. Were realism itself to stem (paradoxically) from a Western strategic culture, its origin would doubtless be the legacy of Clausewitz, who wrote, '[in war] a principle of moderation would be an absurdity' (Griffith, 1963:v). More accurately, it would be the legacy of Clausewitz's disciples, who ignored their master's later qualifications. But realists spurn such roots, claiming that utility maximising is a universal principle unaffected by cultural differences and unconstrained by historical example.

## Grand Strategies

Johnston delineates three types of grand strategy: accommodationist, defensive, and offensive-cum-expansionist. The accommodationist strategy relies on diplomacy, horse-trading, economic incentives and the building of multiple alliances. Its aim is not sharply defined but does not extend to the physical or political elimination of the enemy and annexation of his territory. The defensive strategy relies instead on holding an outer boundary by means of the state's own resources. Force is not employed to destroy the enemy's leadership or state; this is not, by definition, an aggressive strategy. The offensive-cum-expansionist strategy is, however, highly coercive, relying on the pre-emptive or punitive use of force beyond the state's own boundaries. At a minimum this strategy aims to eliminate the enemy's military capacity and at a maximum to destroy his polity.

Since explicit historical statements of preferences for the various strategic options are 'fairly rare', Johnston identifies preferences by subjecting the military writings to textual analyses of two main kinds. The more persuasive is the intricate construction of cognitive maps. Diagrams are presented on which lines are drawn representing causal connections between statements, linking proposed strategic actions and expected positive or negative results. The purpose behind so formalised an approach is to penetrate beneath the surface logic of a text's author. The object is to uncover 'the

text's own logic', which is undoubtedly revealed more starkly by diagrams than by words. But the procedure, or at any rate its execution, is so laborious that *Cultural Realism* seems at times to use a hammer to crack a nut. It comes close to scientism and reads like the densest brand of PhD thesis. But it makes its point.

The other main method is symbolic analysis, searching for symbols of the use of force and efficacy of different strategies in human affairs. The obvious difficulty — that symbol and reality may not correspond — is dealt with through further cognitive mapping and through contextual analysis of the texts and their annotations: yet more painstaking, highly structured, literary scholarship.

The author is well aware of the difficulties, as well he might be after devoting so much effort to recovering the meanings of fugitive allusions in documents of the kinds available. In the Chinese case he is, however, able to argue that symbols and meaning are highly consistent over time. Chinese intellectual history, he says, 'shows marked consistency, indeed tyranny, in the repetitive use of analogies and metaphors' (p. 51). He continues in the words of Lo Jung-pang, that 'the Chinese mind ... is steeped in literary tradition and ... places great stock on the guidance of history. In the conduct of foreign affairs, as in social intercourse, there are maxims and precedents that were so constantly quoted that they became clichés and, like political slogans, exerted an influence in the shaping of policy and the making of decisions' (pp. 51-2).

This is a significant point, relating not merely to the persistence of meanings and their effect on policy in the past, but to the possible continued influence of the same patterns. In the circumstances, it is curious how far history has taken a back seat in discussions of policy towards contemporary China. I am thinking of discussions among politicians, diplomats and journalists who are not themselves China specialists. At the extreme, there is outspoken hostility towards historical allusions, presumably in the belief that these can have nothing to tell us about present intentions. One wonders when those who hold such views think the present begins. Presumably they cannot imagine that the pattern of forces in the world is created anew every instant yet they speak as though behaviour never carries over, so that any claim of intention is merely a tactical gesture. In short, there are authorities who talk as though pure opportunism always rules.

By a great irony this strand of *Realpolitik* opinion has been overridden since the 1980s by another 'theory', just as ahistorical and implying that there simply are no strategic issues of importance. This theory is Economism, which is prevalent in the business community and has its intellectual roots in economics: everyone is assumed to be a rational maximiser. In economism, as in realism, an acultural, ahistorical universalism prevails. At its crudest, economism denies, or ignores, the relevance of strategic choices because it postulates the dominance of profit: no one will ever again go to war because to do so would interrupt trade and destroy profit. When and why the world is supposed to have abandoned its violent past are never made clear. As to China, the economic view seems to be that while that country may still hope to expand, any display of armed force will in reality be bluff. Commercial calculation will prohibit the actual use of force. In practice, despite intellectual foundations as acultural as those of realism, this interpretation veers unexpectedly close to the view of

China specialists, which is that China will avoid or minimise the use of force because of its Confucian-Mencian strategic culture. As Sun Zi wrote, no one ever gained from a protracted war.

Johnston's suggestion that China does have a strategic culture, but a *parabellum*, a hard *Realpolitik* one, is a corrective to all three previous interpretations: the ahistorical realist one that China must be a danger by assumption; the ahistorical economic one that (again by assumption) the country is no danger at all; and the historical one that China is a force-minimalist and unlikely to resort to war. His *parabellum* concept warns us against the soft interpretation of Sun Zi and his confrères but does not require there to be an eternal 'China Threat' of the type realists would expect. Although *parabellum* may seem much the same as realism in practice, its implications are entirely different. Realist thinking assumes that the strategic environment will never alter.

States — or, in Samuel Huntington's (1996) recent upward translation of the relevant units, civilisations — will seek always to expand when and where their neighbours are weak. Strategic culture refers to preferences which persist over long periods but does not logically require that they never change.

### Violence and Modernisation

Is there any evidence that humanity and governments really can forswear violence? The mind throws up familiar counter-instances such as the collapse of the League of Nations or young men volunteering for the military soon after voting for pacifism at the Oxford Union. For all that, we can construe the Western European example as indicating that international relations need not be permanently marred by old habits. In Western Europe nationalism is today in decline. Extensive surveys taken in 1981 and 1990-91 by the European Value Systems Study Group show that international trust is high among young Western Europeans, especially with respect to neighbouring democracies (Dogan, 1993, 1994). The rise of individualism is said to be 'gnawing away' at nationalism and other political ideologies.

Is this something transient, specific to a generation that has not been socialised by war? Do the young merely parade internationalist attitudes to distinguish themselves from their parents? The author of articles on the surveys claims not, arguing that young Western Europeans *are* different: since the Renaissance only one other generation, that before the First World war, has escaped the experience of war (Dogan, 1993:191). The fact that European populations are ageing quite fast also dampens martial ardour; belligerent communities tend to be young ones. There is a shrinking proportion of young people today and they do tend to be internationalists. This pacific turn is quite new. Little over 50 years ago Europe was at war. Certainly we would need to be persuaded that popular attitudes will translate into government actions; but in democracies this is not impossible to credit. A straw in the wind may be the recent self-denying ordinance in Britain about the production and use of land-mines.

What bearing can all this have on China? The first point to be made is that although the circumstances differ they are not utterly different and they are changing for the better. In the background lies the fact that the young in China have no personal knowledge of war either, any more than they have personal experience of the asperi-

ties of Maoist life. Both those experiences lie 20 or so years in the past and cannot speak directly to anyone under 30. Furthermore, theirs is also an ageing society. The median age in China, including Taiwan, is projected to rise from 26 years in 1990 to 35 years by 2010, very close to the medians expected then in Western countries. China is also being transformed by the interaction of the one-child family and the cultural preference for sons. Divorce rates are on the increase, threatening to erode the institution of the Confucian family. Society in the cities is becoming distinctly, even headily, consumerist. The scale of the modernisation of communications is breathtaking. None of these changes is superficial. While no one knows for sure what form of society will result from them, it is reasonable to suppose that, whatever control the state manages to retain, Chinese society will become something new to history — new to its own history — within another generation.

The keys are education and modernisation. This is not to say that these things abolish martial ardour, but they do tend to increase understanding of the issues and diminish blind responses. Consider the following episode: in May 1997 the government of Shenzhen felt obliged to publish an open letter to workers, denying stories about 'China and England waging war in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and surrounding areas' (*The Australian*, 25 June 1997). Migrant workers had been fleeing their jobs because of these rumours. 'The workers just used their simple-minded logic to think that in any takeover, there must be a war', one factory owner is reported as telling *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. We should note however that those who quit were easily replaced and they are, in any case, the type of people derided in the cities as 'ill-educated bumpkins'. That is to say, they are peasants whose human capital has not yet been upgraded in the course of economic growth. Given continued growth, fears as unfounded as theirs should fade away.

The fact of modernisation should give pause to those so persuaded by cultural fixity and the tyranny of China's past that they think the old patterns must be repeated (Jenner, 1992). Those who know too much history are bound to repeat it. Although there is no warrant for a simple-minded economism that must bring all countries to converge on Western liberal democracy, there are already signs in the most developed East Asian countries that demands for political participation and independent law are income-elastic. Demands for non-material goods may become a cascading force once people have been saturated by materialism.

Fashionable comparisons are being made between present-day China and militarist Wilhelmine Germany. Yet while there are plenty of sources of international tension to give one pause, with ordinary luck there may be equal reason to anticipate the evolution of China into a 'normal country'. Admittedly, given the absence of an individualist ethic, change may be slower than in the West. On the other hand, the achievement of economic growth has been unimaginably faster. Quite possibly the early materialistic, nationalistic phase of economic and political development may be compressed in China's case. It is facile to observe culture's persistence in the short run, rely too much on the historical precedents of stasis, or discount the possibility of rapid social change: in short, to project cultural fixity (Jones, 1995:276-7). Instead, it may be that 'Chinese conservatism is not a symptom of rigidity but rather the result of

adaptation to conditions which remained unchanged for thousands of years' (Wilhelm, 1982:45). Conditions are certainly changing now.

## Conclusion

The conclusions to be drawn from Johnston's work remain more tenuous than his thoroughness perhaps deserves. Even so, *Cultural Realism* takes us into a dimension beyond the 'flash-point' surveys of the media and government foreign policy analysts. Johnston simultaneously deconstructs acultural realist thought, with its assumption of permanent threat, and the accommodationist Confucian-Mencian view, with its complacent expectations. He shows that China has inherited a *parabellum* culture of hard *Realpolitik*. While this seems alarming, at least it does not lie at the extreme of the range where claims are heard that war invigorates a nation, like those made by von Treitschke and the Japanese ultranationalists.

What does historical precedent mean? Analogies are often manipulated in a 1984-ish way and cynics may think that history is merely a store from which anything may be drawn for current political ends. Johnston's riposte is that history is not so labile: historical analogies can invalidate particular courses of action. The members of a given society tend when young to internalise versions of its past experience which almost rule out certain geopolitical choices. Even this is too fixed a view, since Chinese thought is said to have succeeded in shifting away from Mao's approach in the 1980s. Mao was clear that war is 'the politics of human bloodshed' in which the goal is to 'preserve oneself and destroy the enemy' (pp. 254-5). Chinese intellectuals claim to have moved from that brutal attitude towards Sun Zi's maxim of 'not fighting and subduing the enemy'. Certainly, Johnston himself does not accept that Chinese strategic culture really has become accommodationist. But this may matter less than the fact that, unlike axiomatic realism, any strategic culture is learned. Whatever has been learned can be unlearned, difficult though this may be for older people. The ultimate message of *Cultural Realism* seems to be, a little in spite of itself, that while we should not expect the Chinese to be gentle, their strategic preferences are capable of being changed by involvement in a peaceful world. Johnston's book seems to justify a calm, firm engagement so that unlearning can proceed.

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