Consider the Role of Culture in China’s Foreign Policy Making, and Discuss How Culture Impacts Chinese Foreign Policy Making

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Abstract. International politics involves the co-ordination and conflict of different countries’ interests, and also contains the clash of different ideological principles. Therefore, it is important to consider the political traditions and values of a state when people do research in the state’s foreign policies. Among the major world powers, China’s foreign policies carry with sinic cultural identities due to its unique cultural traditions. Therefore, away from China’s cultural backgrounds, it is hard to study the connotations and deep-seated motives of Chinese foreign policies. This study brings in arguments from three scholars’ opinions that refer to Chinese cultures and tries to define the functions of these different Chinese cultures. Based on these, this study will discuss how culture impacts Chinese foreign policy making.

Introduction

International politics involves the co-ordination and conflict of different countries’ interests, and also contains the clash of different ideological principles. Therefore, it is important to consider the political traditions and values of a state when people do research in the state’s foreign policies (Wang 1989:130). Among the major world powers, China’s foreign policies carry with sinic cultural identities due to its unique cultural traditions. Therefore, away from China’s cultural backgrounds, it is hard to study the connotations and deep-seated motives of Chinese foreign policies (Zi 1993:8). Relied on three scholars’ academic works that refer to Chinese cultures, which are Ian Johnston’s Cultural realism: strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history, Qin Yaqing’s Relationality and processual construction: bringing Chinese ideas into international relations theory, and Gregory Moore’s “In Your Face”: Domestic Politics, Nationalism, and “Face” in the Sino-Japanese Islands Dispute, this paper tries to define the functions of these different Chinese cultures and discuss how these cultures impact Chinese foreign policy making.

Cultures and Functions

In these readings, three authors put forth three different Chinese cultures from different perspectives, which are strategic culture, relational culture and face culture. First, through empirical analysis about Chinese ancient books and records of Ming dynasty, Johnston (1995:255-258) concluded the active characteristics of China’s strategic cultures are parabellum or hard realpolitik. According to Johnston (1995:1), ‘strategic culture’ tends to mean that ‘there are consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states (or state elites) think about the use of force for political ends’; moreover, he also addressed that ‘strategic culture plays an instrumental or ritualistic role in the strategic decision process’ (1995:27). Therefore, strategic culture has a function that provides goals and directions for state elites’ and states’ behaviors subtly. Put another way, strategic culture could lead people’s ideas, cognitions, thoughts and behaviors to a certain direction consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, strategic culture highlights the orientation function.

Second, Qin (2009:5-6) proposed the relational networking in international society that helps nation-states form their identities and produces international power. Therefore, in Qin’s opinions, ‘relational culture’ could help nation-states to identify their relational identity, and could also
generate international power (2009:15-16). Additionally, relationality, rather than rationality, is the focus and pivot of (international) social life (Qin 2009:14). Thus, the relational culture provides people an angle and a model to observe the world structure and to recognize the position of self. In other words, relational culture helps decision-makers to understand the world, determine their states’ positions and make their foreign policies. People’s views about their states and their states’ positions in the world would impact foreign and domestic policies making (Rosati and Scott 1997:372). Therefore, relational culture embodies the position function.

Third, as a ‘collective self-esteem’, ‘face culture’ is important in China. No matter individuals, families or groups and states, they all have ‘face needs’ (Moore 2014:223). Through the Sino-Japanese islands disputes, Moore (2014:220) found the ‘face needs’ of both sides and proposed when both sides win enough ‘face’ then the territorial disputes might be solved. It is hard to judge the practicability of Moore’s solutions. However, Moore follows the Chinese cultural logic and makes proper cultural choices, to some extent, Moore’s solutions make sense. Chih-yu Shih (1990:190), a Taiwan scholar, stated that ‘the function of diplomacy is to maintain the integrity of the national face in front of the world, the internal citizenry, and statesmen themselves.’ Therefore, face culture restricts the range of diplomatic options, which means ‘face-saving’ is necessary. Put differently, foreign policy making does not refer to choosing a preferred plan from all alternative plans, but choosing an acceptable plan that in line with nations’ cultural values. Therefore, face culture has the regulation function.

Strategic culture’s orientation function, relational culture’s position function and face culture’s regulation function play important roles in the process of foreign policy making and implementing. It cannot equate the functions of Chinese culture with foreign policy making, while from the perspective of cultural functions to explain China’s foreign policy making is effectively and necessarily.

**Orientation Function of Strategic Culture**

There are numerous scholars having stated that China’s mainstream strategic culture is defensive and pacificatory (Qin 2003:13-15; Feng 2005:2; Ferchen 2016). Therefore, the orientation of Chinese strategic culture is peace and harmony.

Strategic culture could influence national strategic orientation, and the carriers of strategic culture are the state leaders, therefore, culture orientates leaders, then leaders make policy. Since the PRC established in 1949, China has appealed for peace for numerous times. For example, in 1953 and 1955, Zhou Enlai advocated the five principles of peaceful coexistence and ‘seeking sameness but keeping difference’ (People’s Daily2013); in 1974, Deng Xiaoping elaborated Mao’s ‘Three Worlds Theory’ in the General Assembly and promised ‘China will never seek hegemony’ (People’s Daily 2013); in 1989, when Deng met with Chatichai, a Thai Prime Minister, Deng pointed out China favors peace (Deng 1993:328); in 2006, Hu Jintao expressed the ideas of harmonious international society in APEC meeting (Guangdong News 2006); in 2010, Xi Jinping also stated China would not pose threats to other countries when Xi met Lee Kuan Yew (Xinhua 2010). Since 1949 to present, every leader of PRC sticks with peace.

Additionally, the trend of pacification also embodies in China’s defence expenditure and nuclear policy. Within the recent ten years, no matter the proportion of GDP or the amount of per capita, China’s defence expenditure is the lower compared with other advanced countries (White Paper 2016). The proportion of defence expenditure in GDP is 1.33% in the past decade, which is far below the world average level (2.6%); in 2015, China’s defence expenditures nearly are 887bn RMB, while which merely amount to 24% of America; the defence expenditure of per soldier of China is 385,600 RMB, which amount to 14.34% of America, 22.13% of Britain and 35.78% of Japan (Xinhua 2016). Moreover, China also pledges that China would not use its nuclear weapons first and will not use them against countries without nuclear capability (White Paper 2000).

Therefore, China’s strategic culture orientates China’s foreign policy making to defensive and pacificatory.
Position Function of Relational Culture

When processing state-to-state relations in the anarchical international society, China emphasizes the principal and secondary contradictions, distinguishes between the enemies and friends, and chooses the correct sides. Therefore, Chinese foreign policy making is mainly decided by where China positioning itself and the relations of China with other countries.

Before the PRC established, Mao has considered the position of China in the world. During the Chinese civil war, the relations of Sino-American became worse while the Sino-Soviet relations became better. Therefore, before the PRC founded, Mao avowed the policy of ‘lean to one side’ (Whiting 1955:145; Kong 2003:84). Back then, Mao posited China as a 'younger brother’ and an ally of the USSR, especially when the ‘Sino-Soviet friendship Union Cooperation Treaty’ signed in 1950. Then the identity of China is the major member of socialist camp. Therefore, relational culture pushed China ‘lean to one side’. However, to some extent, China’s foreign policy makings were influenced by relational culture and rational contemplation together.

Additionally, relational culture could promote the development of international issues. There are several ways to explain why China involved in the Korean War, it is interesting to consider China’s decisions from relational culture perspective. For example, because China enjoyed the special protective relationship with Korea and Mao posited Korea as a vassal of China (Stueck 2004:108; Yang 2006:86; Terrill 1980:207). Moreover, North Korea belongs to socialist camp, Stalin and Kim Il-sung also sought assistances from China. Therefore, China dispatched troops into the war. From this perspective, due to China’s relational culture, the Sino-Korean historical relations and the influence of socialist camp, China defined North Korea’s and America’s positions and made the decision of resisting America, assisting Korea.

In addition, with the change of state-to-state relations, the positions of states will change, and the foreign policy making will also change (Qin 2003:11). For instance, with the Sino-Soviet spilt since 1960s, China's attitudes to the USSR and the US were changing. In 1969, when a Swedish ambassador asked Zhou Enlai which superpowers was most serious threat to China, Zhou replied ‘now the situation is changing; we should wait and see’ (Yang 2010:43). Therefore, due to the change of Sino-Soviet relations, China no longer posited the USSR as ally, which promoted the Sino-American rapprochement possible.

Therefore, with China’s international positions changing, China changes the foreign policy.

Regulation Function of Face Culture

Face is a social feeling connected with the need for social recognition (Hu 1989:57-78). Therefore, when a state’s expectation for social recognition is met in international society, then the state will ‘have face’, feel proud and pleasure; otherwise, the state will ‘lose face’, feel shame and angry.

When China’s expectations for social recognition have been met, then the disputes of China with other countries are more flexible to be solved; if not, offensive operations will be taken in order to retrieve social recognition and face. For example, in 1880s, China waged the Sino-French War about the Annam (Vietnam) disputes, while in the Burma (Myanmar) issues, China reached a compromise with Britain. Besetting with internal and external troubles, keeping the suzerain relations of Sino-Annamese and Sino-Burmese were Qing’s expectations for social recognition (Shi 2006:372). First, in the Sino-British disputes, Qing ‘gained face’ because Qing still kept the suzerain identity apparently, which met Qing’s expectations. Thus, even though Britain proposed to support a new ruler of Burma, and controlled Burma actually. Guangxu Emperor was willing to accept British behaviors, because Britain accepted China’s ‘celestial empire’ identity ostensibly (Shi 2006:372). Second, while in the Sino-French disputes, Qing waged the war against France. Due to ‘the Second Treaty of Saigon’ and ‘Treaty of Huế’, France negated Qing’s suzerain identity and strictly banned Annam from paying tribute to Qing, even though Qing required France to acknowledge the suzerain-feudatory relationship between Qing and Annam strenuously (Shi 2006:323). For China, France’s behaviors were unreasonable and intolerable, and blew up in China’s face. Therefore, Qing waged the Sino-French War in 1883. Similar disputes, different
operations, China ‘have face’ in Sino-British disputes, while ‘lose face’ in Sino-French disputes, therefore, China took different ways to tackle similar disputes.

Therefore, foreign policy making considers multiple factors, while ‘face-saving’ is the basic requirement for China.

**Conclusion**

Culture is a part of national attributes, is also a significant variable in foreign policy making. China’s different cultures play different functions in Chinese foreign policy making, although it is hard to explain and expect China’s foreign policy accurately, just as the rationality, the impacts of culture on foreign policy making should be considered.

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