

Strategic Culture and China: IR Theory Versus the Fortune Cookie?

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 10 (October 2005)

by [Andrew Scobell](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

For a PDF version of this article, click [here](#).

Introduction

For once Sinologists have become innovators in political science, at least on the subject of strategic culture. Iain Johnston published his pioneering work *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* in 1995 to much fanfare and acclaim.^[1] Since then other works have utilized the strategic culture approach, including this writer's *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* published in 2003.^[2] There are also a significant number of volumes, journal articles, and book chapters focused on China that invoke the term but do not deal with the concept in any depth.^[3]

Now, a decade after Johnston's seminal volume, it seems an appropriate point in time to take stock of how far we have come in strategic culture scholarship as a whole and in the field of Chinese security studies in particular. This paper will argue that while significant progress has been made on both counts, developments have not fulfilled the promise of Johnston's path breaking work:

1. First, this paper identifies a major challenge confronting the strategy culture approach.
2. Second, it suggests the key areas in which strategic culture studies of China have advanced the field as a whole.
3. Third, the paper outlines key China-specific areas in which strategic culture studies of the Central Kingdom have made significant advances.
4. Finally, the paper suggests possible fruitful avenues for future research.

The Challenge

A significant challenge confronts those scholars and analysts who believe that culture matters in International Relations (IR). A large number of IR theorists remain disdainful of the concept of culture and dismissive of area studies. Culture tends to be viewed as a residual category that gets in the way of clear, elegant, and straightforward theoretical models and analyses. While

Realism is the hegemonic theory in IR, Rational Choice enjoys comparable hegemony in Comparative Politics. Not surprisingly, cultural approaches get short shrift in both. Thus, for many in mainstream political science, strategic culture analyses of China boil down to a contest between IR theory and the fortune cookie.^[4]

Be that as it may, the onus for countering this widespread perception is upon adherents to demonstrate that culture is a key dimension in security studies. It is they who must demonstrate its importance through the highest standards of scholarship and analysis. To date, they (this writer included) have fallen somewhat short in this endeavor. No scholarship—on China at least—has equaled the high standards set by Iain Johnston a decade ago. But the good news is that we have made progress and there are a handful of bright young scholars who have taken up Johnston's mantle.

Contributions Made

So what contributions have China scholars made to the broader study of strategic culture and to the study of Chinese security? Regarding the former, I suggest the contributions have been in four main areas: rigor, sophistication, framing, and domestication. Regarding the latter, advances have been made in at least three areas: recognizing the diversity of China's strategic traditions, appreciating the significance of rhetoric, and understanding China's actual use of military force.

Toward Advancing Strategic Culture Analysis

First, substantial progress has been made in terms of rigor. This is especially true in Iain Johnston's research. He has been particularly good at laying out relatively clear definitions, explicit methodology, and operationalizing his concepts. Johnston, for example, makes good use of cognitive mapping.^[5] These efforts permit others to replicate his results relatively easily. But Johnston's definitions and research design are not totally flawless and scholars have identified some methodological problems.^[6] On the matter of definition, Johnston specifies the "what" but omits the "who." This writer has sought to improve on Johnston's laudable effort and define strategic culture as "the set of fundamental and enduring assumptions about the role of war in human affairs and the efficacy of applying force *held by a country's political and military elites.*"^[7]

Second, the scholarship on strategic culture has become more sophisticated thanks to the advances made by researchers studying China. Many analysts have tended to invoke the words "strategic culture" or an explicitly cultural approach and proceed to engage in blanket stereotyping about a particular country or society. This approach is similar to the "national character" approach which, when applied to China, might be summarized as follows: "Chinese tend to emphasize stratagem over brute force." Such statements are often supported by making reference to Confucianism or quoting Sun Tzu.^[8] At worst, sloppy scholarship gives cultural approaches a bad name; at best this type of work tends to engage in dead end circular logic. Again, if applied to China, the assertion would be along the following lines: "Chinese act like this because this is how Chinese act." In short, often the simplistic assumption was that a country possesses a single unified strategic culture.

One of Iain Johnston's the most important findings has been to identify the existence of two strands of Chinese strategic culture: a "Parabellum" (or Realpolitik) one and a "Confucian-Mencian" one. Still, the significance of this breakthrough was weakened by Johnston's conclusion that while two strands existed, only one—the Parabellum strand—was operative and the other was purely for "idealized discourse."^[9] The present writer's own research also discerns the existence of two strands of Chinese strategic culture but, unlike Johnston, Scobell argues that BOTH the Realpolitik and Confucian-Mencian strands are operative. In fact, this writer contends that the two strands interact in a dialectic fashion to produce a distinctive "Chinese Cult of Defense."^[10]

Third, scholarship on China has provided some interesting ideas on how to frame, contextualize, and conceptualize strategic culture. Where and how does it fit in to the hierarchy and greater schema of political science theories? Johnson argues that Chinese realism stems from ideational sources rather than structural factors. Scobell suggests that a country's strategic culture be conceptualized as one layer in a multilayered cake. This cake contains various tiers of culture: political, civil-military, organizational, and strategic. A full appreciation for the cake requires one to sample a piece with all the layers contained in one mouthful.[11]

Moreover, the vast majority of strategic culture adherents have limited their analysis of the impact of strategic culture to explain how one country's own strategic culture influences its strategic behavior. They have grasped only half of the picture, missing what this writer labels the "second face of strategic culture"—the strategic cultural image that the political and military elites of a country hold of a particular adversary or potential adversary. Leaders' perceptions of another country's capabilities, activities, and intentions are filtered through how these elites conceive of the other country's strategic culture. This image is defined as "the preconceived stereotype of the strategic disposition of another nation, state, or people that is derived from a selective interpretation of history traditions, and self-image." [12] This writer has conducted preliminary research on the China's "second face of strategic culture" regarding the United States, Japan, and India.[13]

Fourth, while studies of strategic culture have focused on the external use of force and foreign policy, they have excluded consideration of domestic influences and policies on a country's strategic culture seems arbitrary and ill-advised. First of all, most states consider national security to encompass internal and as well as external threats. After September 11, 2001, the United States is much more focused on domestic threats to security. But even before this historically there have been significant deployments and employments of military force internally and in border and frontier areas of the United States. Scholars who ignore intrastate and societal violence risk missing an important piece of the puzzle.[14] Of particular note is the domestic use of military force: in many other countries soldiers are routinely deployed/ employed internally to deal with riots, rebellions, and insurgencies. This is certainly true for China. In the decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been employed to deal with social upheaval on an massive scale in the late 1960s (soldiers restored order following the most tumultuous phases of the so-called Cultural Revolution) and in 1989 the PLA was used to end popular protests in Beijing (culminating in the violent crackdown in the Chinese capital on the weekend of June 3-4).[15]

Strategic culture scholars (and other researchers) have focused largely on classic works of strategy and statecraft or official doctrine. In concentrating on what might be called the "great tradition" or "high culture", they have all but ignored the arena of popular culture or what has been called the "little tradition." In most societies there are rich and varied folk traditions with graphic depictions of war and violence and replete with colorful heroes and powerful symbols. These traditions greatly influence members of a society as they grow up and imbue them with values, ideals, and images that are likely to remain with them for the rest of their lives.[16] This is certainly true in China where classic dramas, legends, and novels often drawn from ancient Chinese history are well known to most Chinese.

Toward Advancing Strategic Culture Analysis on China

There has also been progress in the China field in at least three areas: a deeper understanding of the variety and scope of the country's strategic traditions; a more nuanced understanding of Chinese strategic rhetoric, and advances in discerning patterns in China's use of military force.

First, the study of strategic culture has resulted in a deeper understanding of the scope and variety of China's strategic traditions. Culture has long been considered a critical dimension in

China's approach to strategy and warfare. While the term "strategic culture" was not used until 1988,[17] conventional thinking was that China's Confucian tradition was a key determining factor in Chinese strategic thinking. Because of Confucianism, in this interpretation, China tends to favor harmony over conflict, and defense over offense.[18] Other analysts, usually focusing on Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, have stressed a Chinese predisposition for stratagem over combat and psychological and symbolic warfare over head-to-head combat on the battlefield.[19]

As a result of recent scholarship there is greater appreciation that Chinese strategy does not stem exclusively from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* or Confucianism but also includes such traditions as Legalism and Daoism as well as popular myths and folk traditions.[20] Furthermore, this writer has argued that real existing Chinese strategic culture is a result of interaction between different strands of strategic tradition. The outcome has been called "Cult of Defense" whereby Chinese elites fervently believe that China is under the sway of a unique peace-loving, non-expansionist, defensive-minded strategic tradition.

Second, there is more nuanced appreciation for the subtleties of the rhetoric of contemporary Chinese strategy, doctrine, and signaling. There is, for example, more respect for "active defense" as a meaningful strategic idea. This concept had been considered almost meaningless by some analysts either because it was seen merely as propaganda or because it was considered a rubbery term that has lost any of the original meaning it might have had once.[21] Indeed, active defense does appear to have considerable flexibility in the sense that it permits Chinese leaders to rationalize virtually any use of force as defensive, including pre-emptive strikes.[22]

Third, there has been modest but discernible progress in understanding China's use of force. Because of the interaction between different strands of strategic culture and the way China's strategists define 'defense' virtually any use of force by China is defensive in nature.[23] Thus, paradoxically China is more disposed to use force when confronting a political-military crisis than it would otherwise be. Iain Johnston's research suggests that China is a realpolitik power that historically has not shrunk from using force. This writer's research has expanded upon Johnston's basic findings suggesting that while China's elites view the world in realpolitik terms, at the same time they perceive China's own strategic culture as Confucian or pacifist and defensive-minded. But while Johnston contends that the Confucian strand is essentially symbolic, Scobell asserts it is much more and interacts in dialectic fashion with the realpolitik strand to produce a "Cult of Defense." The result is "...a Beijing ready to employ military force assertively against perceived external or internal threats all the while insisting that China possesses a cultural aversion to using force, doing so only defensively and solely as a last resort." [24]

The Cult of Defense identifies six principles that influence Chinese strategists: (1) the primacy of national unification; (2) heightened threat perceptions; (3) the concept of active defense; (4) Chinese just war theory; (5) chaos phobia; and (6) an emphasis on the welfare of the community over that of the individual.[25] The combined effect of these principles is a predisposition by China to resort to force in a crisis, a marked tendency toward risk taking, and justifying the use of force in terms of the big picture:

1. First, under the influence of the Cult of Defense, Chinese elite thinking on the use force can be summed up in the following tongue-in-cheek mantra: "Use force sparingly; repeat as often as needed." [26]
2. Second, the record of communist China's use of force since 1949 reveals a disturbing habit of calculated risk taking. While Chinese leaders do not use force lightly or without a considerable amount of thought, they are prone to believe that calculated risks are worth taking. They seem confident that China can ensure escalation control by strictly limiting the scale, area, and timing of its application of military power.[27] Moreover, when Chinese look at their record of the use of force, they conclude there has been a one hundred percent success rate.[28]

3. Third, when Chinese deliberate about when and how to use force, they do not think in terms of operational victory. For them, the criterion of success is the impact of the operation on the “overall situation.”^[29] If they can conclude that China has bought some time and, for a few years, deterred the Soviet Union and/or Vietnam from a campaign of military adventurism (Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969, Vietnam border war of 1979), then the price in blood and treasure was worth it.

Challenges to Strategic Culture Scholarship

General Challenges:

There are a number of important challenges to be addressed if strategic culture scholarship is to move forward. First, greater methodological rigor is essential. The standards set by Iain Johnston must be upheld. Providing definitions, clearly identifying and then operationalizing one's variables are all essential. Are the data to be analyzed military classics, defense white papers, military academy textbooks and curricula, or elite memoirs? A second challenge is to demonstrate causality—the link missing in many strategic culture studies (including this writer's!)

China Challenges:

The scholarship on Chinese strategy runs the risk of perpetuating a belief that China is unlike any other country in the world and can therefore only be understood on its own terms (i.e. a fortune cookie).^[30] This is a particular danger for strategic culture analyses because of a tendency to highlight the unique or at least distinctive aspects of Chinese culture and traditions.^[31] The unfortunate result could be that we only succeed in making Chinese approaches to warfare and strategy appear more impenetrable and incomprehensible to outsiders, and decipherable only to those possessing extensive study, language training, and in-country experience. Only learned high priests can accurately interpret the oracle bones, or in this case, read the tea leaves. This outcome would retard rather than advance strategic culture scholarship.

By Way of Conclusion: Getting Back and Going Forward

Strategic culture holds significant promise as a fruitful concept in interpreting and understanding how different countries approach matters of war, peace, strategy, and the use of military force. Considerable challenges remain, however. These include clarifying concepts as well as units and levels of analysis. Should adherents focus on states, different bureaucracies, groupings of leaders, or on individual leaders? Should adherents focus on grand strategy alone or look also at the operational level of war?

In tackling these questions, strategic culture adherents should be willing to experiment with new ideas and approaches, revisiting old concepts and approaches, or even combining, adapting, or borrowing from various approaches. One fruitful avenue of inquiry might be to go back and take another look at the operational code approach. Indeed, this is exactly what one scholar in the field of Chinese security studies is doing.^[32] Another worthwhile avenue to explore would be to go back to the original context in which strategic culture was raised by Jack Snyder in the 1970s—to understand the nuclear doctrine of an adversary. But beyond these ideas, making real progress almost certainly requires cross-national comparative analysis. Therein lies the ultimate challenge for next generation of strategy culture scholars.

About the Author

Andrew Scobell is an Associate Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, PA. He may be contacted by e-mail at: andrew.scobell@carlisle.army.mil.

This paper contains only the views of the author and does not represent the policies or positions of the U.S. Army, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government. It was prepared for the Comparative Strategic Culture Conference, September 21-22, 2005 the Center for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page.

To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email ccc@nps.edu with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

References

1. Alastair I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). Lowell Dittmer also labeled the book "pioneering." See his review, "The Culture of Structural Realism," in *The Review of Politics* 59: 1 (Winter 1997), 194.

2. Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Other works that focus on China and analyze strategic culture or utilize strategic culture approach include: Rosita Dellios, "How May the World Be at Peace?: Idealism as Realism in China's Strategic Culture," in Valerie M. Hudson, ed., *Culture and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997). Shu Guang Zhang, "China: Traditional and Revolutionary Heritage" in Ken Booth and Russell Trood, eds., *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999), 29-50. Mark Burles and Abraham N. Shulsky, *Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000); Tiejun Zhang, "Chinese Strategic Culture: Traditional and Present Features," *Comparative Strategy* 21 (2002), 73-90.

For some key works in Chinese, see Gong Yuzhen, *Zhongguo zhanlue wenhua jixi* [Analyzing Chinese strategic culture (Beijing: Junshe Kexue Chubanshe, 2002)]; Li Jijun, "Lun zhanlue wenhua," [on strategic culture] *Zhongguo junshi kexue* [China military science] no. 1, 1997, 8. See also Li Jijun, *Traditional Military Thinking and the Defense Strategy of China*, An address to the US Army War College, Letort Paper No. 1, with an introduction by Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, August 29, 1997). For the Chinese language version, see Li Jijun, "Zhongguo junshi sixiang chuantong yu fangyu zhanlue," *Zhongguo junshi kexue* [China Military Science] no. 4, Winter 1997, 62-64.

3. See, for example, Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Paul H.B. Godwin, "Force and Diplomacy: China Prepares for the Twenty-First Century," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 171-192;

4. The title of this paper cribs shamelessly from the title of a chapter written by Allen S. Whiting entitled: "Forecasting Chinese Foreign Policy: IR Theory vs. the Fortune Cookie," in Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh, eds., *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994), 506-523. Whiting, of course, is evaluating the usefulness of political

science theories compared to area studies insights in forecasting Chinese actions. By contrast, In this paper I am trying to underscore how many in the discipline of political science view strategic culture and how it has been employed to analyze Chinese phenomena.

5. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*; Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Grand Strategy in Maoist China," in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 216-268.

6. See, for example, Joseph Esherick's review in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 56:3 (August 1997), 771.

7. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 2.

8. See, for example, Edward S. Boylan, "The Chinese Cultural Style of Warfare," *Comparative Strategy* 3:4 (1982), 341-364 and Jonathan R. Adelman and Chih-yu Shih, *Symbolic War: The Chinese Use of Force, 1840-1980* (Taipei: Institute for International Relations, 1993), chapter 2.

9. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 173.

10. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, chapter 2.

11. Scobell, *Ibid.*, 3.

12. Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture*, 2.

13. On Chinese perceptions of U.S and Japanese strategic culture images, see Andrew Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, May 2002). On Chinese perceptions of Indian strategic culture images, see Andrew Scobell, "'Cult of Defense' and 'Great Power Dreams': The Influence of Strategic Culture on China's Relationship with India," in Michael R. Chambers, ed., *South Asia 2020: Future Strategic Balances and Alliances* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, November 2002), 329-259.

14. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 19, 23-25.

15. On these two episodes, see Scobell, *Ibid.*, chapters 5 and 7.

16. Scobell, *Ibid.*, 23.

17. Chong-Pin Lin, *China's Nuclear Strategy: Evolution Within Tradition* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1988).

18. Fairbank, "Introduction," in Fairbank and Kierman, eds., *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 1-26. For a similar type of argument which stresses the influence of Daoism, see Rosita Dellios, "How May the World Be at Peace?"

19. Adelman and Shih, *Symbolic War*; Howard L. Boorman and Scott A. Boorman, "Strategy and National Psychology in China," *The Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 1967, 143-155; Boylan, "The Chinese Cultural Style of Warfare."

20. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 19-23. See also Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).

21. For an assessment judging it to be propaganda, see Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 249-50, especially note 63.
22. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, *Op. Cit.*, 34-35.
23. Scobell, *Ibid.*, chapter 2, especially 26-39.
24. Scobell, *Ibid.*, 193.
25. Scobell, *Ibid.*, 32-38.
26. Andrew Scobell, "Is There a Chinese Way of War?" *Parameters* XXXV:1 (Spring 2005), 119.
27. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, *Op. Cit.*, 193.
28. Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell, and Larry Wortzel, "Introduction," in Burkitt, Scobell, and Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History: The PLA at 75* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, July 2003), 6-7.
29. Scobell, "Is There a Chinese Way of War?" *Op. Cit.*, 118; Ron Christman, "How Beijing Evaluates Military Campaigns: An Initial Assessment," Burkitt, Scobell, and Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History*, 253-292.
30. This tends to a major theme underlying the work of Michael Pillsbury. See Michael Pillsbury, ed., *Chinese Views of Future Warfare* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1997) and Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2000).
31. One might exempt Johnston's *Cultural Realism* from this criticism but probably not Scobell's *China's Use of Military Force*.
32. Huiyun Feng, "A Dragon on Defense: China's Strategic Culture and War." Ph. D. Dissertation, Arizona State University, May 2005.