

The Confucian Culture Threat: Perceptions and Misperceptions

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This article examines the perceptions and misperceptions of the "Confucian culture threat" through an analysis of Chinese political, economic, and military capabilities. It contends that a simple causal model of culture and behavior, while partially capturing some salient aspects, does not fully explain the complexities and nuances of the dynamic interaction between China and the United States or between domestic and regional politics. In fact, the miscalculated growth of China's cultural and material strength and the resulting increase in fears and vulnerabilities have enhanced Washington's misperceptions of Beijing's strategic preferences and choices. The efforts to reshape such misperceived behavior and culture have also reinforced Beijing's suspicions about the U.S. China policy, and thus undermined both the bilateral relationship and regional stability. To foster mutual understanding, peace, and prosperity, imperative is to institutionalize East Asian security cooperation.

KEYWORDS: threat; perception; misperception; culture; security

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The "Confucian culture threat" has attracted special attention in the United States. The central question is twofold: First, does a substantively consistent and temporally persistent Confucian culture foster the perceived political, economic, and military threats that China poses to the vital inter-

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ests of the United States? Second, does U.S. perceptions of and responses to such threats, in turn, reshape China's empirically observable behavior and culture or matter for both Sino-American relations and East Asian stability? In hope of providing both a new post-Cold War paradigm and a more effective way to deal with an emerging superpower, scholars and politicians alike have wrestled with and debated these issues, with a special focus on the causal connections or disconnections of culture and behavior. Regardless of these painstaking efforts, Beijing's rapidly increased "comprehensive national strength" (both cultural and material) and subsequently limited aggressive behavior have produced uneasiness in Washington and transformed the bilateral relationship from "quasi allies" to "neither friend nor foe" competitors pursuing their respective self-interests in regional politics.

Discussions on this strategic change have contributed to growing concerns over China's potential path toward superpower status. The most influential study is Samuel Huntington's 1993 article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations," a pioneering attempt to formulate a culture threat theory that applied to Confucian and other major civilizations. His follow-on book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, further developed his conception of the culture threat, and quickly became a classic of international relations.¹ Advocates try to test and justify this theory through explanations of the relationships between Beijing's statements and political, economic, and military behavior, which are often perceived as vehicles for destabilizing regional peace and security. The interpretation of such words and behavior—Beijing's assertive China-centric approach to regional politics, rapid economic development, and qualitatively improved military muscle—and the design of possible responses forecast the eventual clash of civilizations. Others attempt to downplay such speculation, having a wider appreciation for both the multifaceted issues inherent in relations between different cultures as well as the delicate links between domestic and regional politics. This group sees China as a victim of the

¹Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-49; and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

threat theory. In Beijing's propaganda parlance, the theory is designed to "subvert China politically, to frustrate it economically, and to contain it strategically."² Despite the divergences on the question of who threatens whom, what needs explanation is distorted threat perceptions. In relations between Washington and Beijing there has been a widespread and justified diagnosis that the "China threat" has been misperceived, miscalculated, and exaggerated. The result has been a mismatch between China's words and behavior, and U.S. assessment of them.

Chinese and U.S. threat perceptions are qualitatively different: the essence is different, and the implications are different. However, the threat perceptions of each side also share two basic elements. First is the declared intention or perceived possibility of one state causing damage to the interests of the other, a situation which reflects degrees of political, economic, and military vulnerabilities. The second involves salient ways to assess and predict how the other will speak, behave, and thus respond, in order to tailor one's actions accordingly. Net assessment of these divergences and convergences often requires clarification of the complex interaction between the threatened and the threatener, i.e., what the threatened brings to the situation by way of preconceptions, fears, and hopes, and what the perceived threatener actually says and does. The interaction is affected by aggravating factors consisting of distinct cultures, behavior, politics, and standard operating procedures that magnify the problems of net threat assessment. This paper examines the issues affecting the interaction between

²Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); *Report of the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999). Also available as Christopher Cox, "The Cox Report," May 25, 1999, at <<http://www.coxreport.com>>; Edward Timperlake and William Triplett, *Red Dragon Rising: China's Military Threat to America* (New York: Regnery Publishing Inc., 1999); Evan Feigenbaum, "Who's behind China's High-Tech Revolution?" *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999): 95-126; Nicholas Kristof, "The Real Chinese Threat," *New York Times*, August 27, 1995, A1; Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 149-68; David Shambaugh, "Growing Strong: China's Challenge to Asian Security," *Survival* 36, no. 2 (1994): 43-59; Chong-Pin Lin, "The Stealthy Advance of China's People's Liberation Army," *The American Enterprise*, January/February 1994, 29-35; Wang Zhongren, "China Threat Theory Groundless," *Beijing Review*, July 14-20, 1997, 7-8; and Gerald Segal, "Does China Matter?" *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 5 (September/October 1999): 24-36.

Beijing and Washington through analyzing political, economic, and military aspects of the "Confucian culture threat" theory. The following sections will outline the theoretical weaknesses and strengths of each type of argument in order to highlight prospects for regional stability.

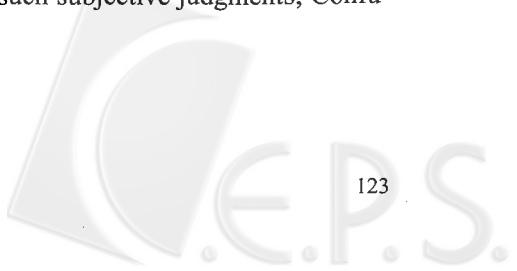
The Political Threat

The primary concern of the "Confucian culture threat" theory, developed by Huntington, is about cultural conflict and its relationship to the behavior of regional powers. To explore the assumed causal connections, he conceptualizes a model of cultural conflict between "the West and the rest," since he is disappointed to see that many societies are demonstrating increased de-Westernization, indigenization, and an apparent willingness to go their own way. More important, the rise of Confucian culture and China as a dominant civilization and power in East Asia directly, if not indirectly, poses a serious challenge to U.S. interests, bringing to the fore the cultural differences between China and the United States.

According to Huntington's reasoning, the Confucian ethos stresses the values of authority, hierarchy, the subordination of individual rights and interests, the importance of consensus, the avoidance of confrontation, saving face, and the supremacy of the state over society and society over the individual. These Confucian orientations, attitudes, and values sharply contrast with the American beliefs of liberty, equality, democracy, and individualism, as well as the American propensity to distrust government, oppose authority, promote checks and balances, encourage competition, and sanctify human rights. China is culturally bent on East Asian domination, and any attempt to harmonize Sino-American relations and coexist with this regime appears impossible.

Thus, the United States must maintain as much pressure as possible on Beijing until China transforms into a peaceful and cooperative democratic society.³ Under the guidance of such subjective judgments, Confu-

³Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 225.



cian culture is misperceived as China's political culture shaping Chinese orientations, attitudes, and values toward domestic politics and China's relations with regional powers.

Huntington's explanation is unsatisfactory, if not wrong. The Chinese agree to disagree on what are the roles that Confucian culture plays and what forms of Confucian culture are desirable in Chinese state and society. These old or new anomalies question the extent to which Beijing is willing to accept harmony-centered Confucianism, rather than other aspects of conflict-centered Chinese culture as a political culture sustaining the presumed political ambition of dominating East Asia and possibly the world at large. His inability to justify his hypothesis of inevitable conflict and to deal with the anomalies seems to weaken his efforts to theorize potential cultural conflict between China and the United States.

Confucian culture is neither a political culture nor a religion in China. Instead, it is philosophy and popular culture. The cardinal principle of Confucian teachings is "*he wei gui*" ("Harmony is the most valuable of the natural and human worlds").⁴ This idea, consisting of multitudinous inter-related and interconnected parts, is regarded in Chinese culture as the highest good in an abstract sense. Heaven, presiding over the parts, is a force for harmony and balance. However, human beings under the Son of Heaven are the agents of harmony and disharmony. When any one falls from one's functional place, the harmony of the whole organism will be impaired. As a result, seeking, building, and maintaining harmony between the natural and human worlds become the ideal of the state and society. In a less abstract sense harmony means the good society. In a well-regulated society, every one knows one's own place and observes one's own duties, while subordinating one's individual rights and interests to collective rights and interests. By application of knowledge, wisdom, and discipline, the people maintain social harmony. This Confucian ethic marks a difference of fundamental importance between Chinese and other major civilizations.

At the core of the cultural difference is *dao*, the immutable order of

⁴Confucius, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Classics, 1979), 61.

harmony, tranquillity, and equilibrium underlying the universe and human society. The Confucian affirmation of the world order implies sanctification of tradition and toleration of other cultures. Lack of emotional tension for remaking the world reflects the desire and priority of maintaining the status quo, based on *ren* (benevolence), the most important quality that a person can possess. Benevolence produces ethical rules—"let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son"—governing action in every aspect of life.⁵ The ethical element also highlights spiritual character. After a lifetime of spiritual cultivation one would achieve what one desires naturally: "At seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line."⁶

However, the Confucian dream or ideal is a past utopia, a golden age, the ideally confrontation-free holistic order that supposedly existed in remote antiquity. The objective is to bring about the rebirth of the ancient Zhou empire, spiritually. Far from being a radical innovator or reformer, Confucius himself is a restorer of something old and forgotten. His philosophical ideas and insights are not divorced from daily ordinary activities; they go straight to what antedated Heaven. Despite political and socio-economic changes in China, *dao* of this kind constitutes and remains the cornerstone of Confucian culture. Huntington forgets this ethics-centered, restoration-oriented nature.

The culture threat theory in fact reflects the fears, caused by both Western discussions on cultural China and growing nationalism in China itself. "Cultural China," the idea of an intellectual discourse, refers to a three-tier symbolic universe. The first tier consists of China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong; the second tier is Chinese communities across the world; and the third tier contains scholars, journalists, entrepreneurs, and writers, who try to understand China intellectually and bring their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities. Cultural China as a concept is aimed at exploring cultural roots and a commitment to a form of depoliticized humanism. The meaning of being Chinese—rather than a

⁵*Ibid.*, 114.

⁶*Ibid.*, 63.



political question—is a human concern pregnant with ethical-religious implications. Accordingly, for all its power and influence, China as a civilization-state is negligible in the international discourse on global human concerns. In essence, advocates of a cultural China challenge the Chinese authoritarian state and propose a pluralist model—the "periphery as the center," that is, the periphery will come to set the cultural agenda for the center. A significantly weakened center may turn out to be a blessing in disguise for the emergence of a truly functioning Chinese civilization-state.⁷ This intellectual—but Americanized—discourse raises questions of the Chinese civilization-state that could enhance the possible Sinicization of other civilizations. This "civilization state"-without-borders may become a cultural empire.

The above concern is central to Huntington's belief that "there are not two suns in the sky, there cannot be two emperors on earth."⁸ In order to justify his misperception of the Chinese state in which all power emanates from above, from the center, and from a single supreme ruler, Huntington depicts China as the "world center" dreamed by Chinese rulers. Yet this Chinese order or model of hierarchical power has never materialized. On the contrary, local power bases or kingdoms always competed with the central authority to seek self-interests in the name of the central authority. The emperors, old and new, never effectively controlled their subordinates, although Confucian culture favors the centralized form of power. Soft rather than hard centralization is the key feature of the Chinese state.

There can be no doubt that this softly centralized state has become more assertive in pursuit and defense of its interests, and more de-Westernized and indigenous. China's law on the territorial seas and adjacent areas, passed on February 25, 1992, reaffirmed the Chinese claim of sovereignty over Nansha (Spratly) and Diaoyutai (Senkaku) islands. Regional powers view the claim as a sign of hegemony-seeking. This perceived assertiveness was also associated with the highly publicized books, *The China That*

⁷Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," *Daedalus* 121, no. 2 (1992): 12-13.

⁸Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 234.

Can Say No and *Why Can China Say No*, which led to a nationwide debate on Beijing's relations with the United States and other major powers in 1996.⁹ Radical young intellectuals, moderate senior scholars, and liberal politicians, who were the driving force of democracy movements in the 1980s, now view the "China threat," an invention of the West, as the continuation of power politics against a still-weak China.

Since 1840, China has been subject to humiliation, aggression, and invasion. Regardless of the expressions used by the Clinton administration, China sees U.S. China policy as either "peaceful evolution" leading to American-type democracy with free elections, representative government, and human rights guaranteed by law or "containment" leading to the ruin or retardation of China's modernization programs. The overall objective is to undermine China's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and modernization.

These Chinese threat perceptions have been formed and reinforced by U.S. China policy and partisan politics in Washington, with emphasis on "China's internal affairs"—Taiwan, Tibet, human rights, and the Falungong crackdown. For instance, the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, introduced into the U.S. Senate in March 1999, calls for expanded military cooperation and exchanges, and for the establishment of a contingent secure direct communications link between Taiwanese and U.S. armed forces. The Act also requires the administration to submit to Congress Taiwan's annual list of requested military assistance, to describe the defense needs asserted by Taiwan, and to justify all rejections, postponements, or modifications of any such requests.¹⁰ In other issues, the Congress proposes to send an envoy to Tibet, which many in the United States regard as an occupied territory. Washington supports human rights or Falungong activists, especially those strongly opposing the regime. Each arrest, expulsion, or problem suffered by these activists has caused deep U.S. concern and received extensive coverage in U.S. news reports. The U.S. bombing of the

⁹Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, and Qiao Bian, *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* (The China that can say no) (Beijing: Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 1996); and Peng Qian et al., *Zhongguo weishenme keyi shuo bu?* (Why can China say no?) (Beijing: Xinhijie chubanshe, 1996).

¹⁰Available at <<http://www.taiwansecurity.com>>.

Chinese embassy in Belgrade further strengthened such threat perceptions and triggered protests all across China. This new evaluation of U.S. attitudes toward China has contributed to a search by the Chinese for the real values of their culture and has thus transformed this generation of intellectuals into die-hard supporters of the de-Westernization movement of the 1990s.

The fatal flaw of the culture threat theory is the misperception of Confucian culture, defined as political culture generating imaginary dangers. In justifying the culture threat argument, Huntington tries to avoid accounting for the present political environment in China, while referring exclusively to a single cultural tradition and value and presenting no evidence of a transition from a harmony-centered to a confrontation-centered Confucianism. Of course, the Confucian tradition, to some extent, continues to live on in present-day institutions and beliefs. However, this is not the only Chinese tradition, nor has it remained free from change. Traditional Chinese culture has been influenced by the interaction among Confucian ideals, Legalist practices, and Daoist spirit. In other words, what lives on today is the Confucian moral and philosophical insight and the warehouse of Confucian popular values, but not Confucian political ideology. The Chinese do not and will not recognize Confucian ideals of the "good society" in remote antiquity. In fact, Confucius himself never succeeded in inspiring his contemporaries to fight for such a utopia as their destiny.

The Economic Threat

Huntington's account of the "Confucian culture threat" de-emphasizes the Confucian rationale, while overestimating Confucian culture and potential for economic development. Inspired by his causal links, Huntington fosters the dangerously alluring illusion of cultural determinism. In place of the revolutionary legitimacy of Marxism-Leninism, Beijing substituted "performance legitimacy provided by surging economic development and nationalist legitimacy provided by innovation of the distinct characteristics of Chinese culture." To Huntington, the Chinese economic area has thus emerged as the "world's fourth growth pole," along with the United States,

Japan, and Germany. Not surprisingly, moreover, the economy of East Asia has become China-centered and Chinese-dominated, essentially fueled by the rapid growth of the mainland and the three other Chinas plus the central role which ethnic Chinese have played in developing the economies of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. China's continued economic development will facilitate the conversion of its economic resources into military power. China will resume its place as regional hegemon and the East will be coming into its own.¹¹

Based on "more comprehensive assessment" conducted by other "China threat" supporters, China will almost certainly be the largest economy in the world, vastly bigger in absolute terms than any of its neighbors, by sometime early in the next century. This economy has been strengthened by the reversion of Hong Kong to China, with foreign exchange reserves estimated at US\$60 billion. If successful, Taiwan's unification with the mainland will add the world's nineteenth biggest economy to China's already massive totals. More frightening, China's huge trade surplus has been accumulated at the expense of the United States. Beijing has built what will soon be the world's largest foreign exchange reserve, a future source of political as well as economic power. Moreover, China is using billions of American dollars to buy state-of-the-art weapons systems from Russia and Western Europe and is subsidizing its own trade deficits with countries that are not as open to Chinese exports as the United States. In short, the current economic relationship with China is fundamentally against the national interests of the United States.¹²

Contrary to these claims, a closer look at the Chinese case suggests a complex picture of economic development. What Confucian culture values the most is the fundamental inner-worldly orientation of "*keji fuli weiren*" ("To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence").¹³ The idea is the iron law of Confucian human relations, shaping the behavior of the Chinese. This self-control and

¹¹Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 103, 106, 168-70.

¹²Bernstein and Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China*, 59-60, 207-8.

¹³Confucius, *The Analects*, 112.

self-imposed law requires, but also compels, the people ethically to accept rather than transform the given world through self-cultivation, a precondition for regulating human (family) relations, and thus for the governing of the state. By extension, Confucian culture implies an ethical approach to managing ties between nature and human beings. The vision of linking the self through human relations to the state helps neutralize tensions between self and society, and between nature and human beings. In Max Weber's words, "the rational adjustment to the world" or the absence of the "spirit of capitalism"—the innovating impetus—in fact prevents China from developing rational capitalism.¹⁴

Perhaps Chinese reforms prove, rather than disprove, Weber's hypothesis. Under the influence of the "Asian miracle," Beijing indeed began to study and explore the role of Confucian culture in economic development. For China, East Asian consciousness (Confucianism) enhances the spirit of self-reliance and minimizes the perception of dependency that dominated East Asia; thus the East Asian people are their own economic masters, not servants of other great powers.¹⁵ Such an interpretation and incremental reforms, rather than Confucian culture alone, have resulted in China's impressive achievement in the 1990s. The key to success is an increase in export through the rapid pace of domestic structural change, appropriate economic policies, proximity of preexisting export production networks, the astute accommodation of opportunities created by East Asian economic restructuring, and foreign direct investment (although the most successful export sectors are geographically concentrated and institutionally discrete). More significant, China has escaped the direct impact of the East Asian financial crisis, partly because of a nonconvertible currency which prevents inflows and outflows of hot money but does not prevent China from enjoying a great deal of foreign direct investment and joint ventures. Further cuts in interest rates and an expansionary fiscal package amounting to about two and half percent of gross domestic product (GDP) are to provide worthwhile support for activity in the period ahead. The con-

¹⁴Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 248.

¹⁵Zhang Liwen, "East Asian Consciousness and Harmony Spirit," *Xinhua wenzhai* (New China Digest), 1998, no. 5:144.

tinuing strong balance of payments and foreign reserve position, in the context of a relatively closed capital account, allows the maintenance of the current value of the *renminbi*.¹⁶ The achievements, to some extent, reflect the relative contributions of the frequently discussed "Greater China."

"Greater China" is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, consisting of various actors, dimensions, and processes. The common theme in discussions of Greater China is the integration of various Chinese economies by overcoming and softening the political boundaries that once divided and isolated them. Economic sanctions imposed by the West on China after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident and the gradual fall of political barriers created a favorable environment for the sharp increase in investment and trade among China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian countries. Cultural exchange rapidly resumed, reflecting the desire for interaction among those enjoying a common culture.¹⁷

However, "China threat" advocates misread the Greater China phenomenon—believing that Confucianism provides the cultural basis for economic development. Confucian culture appears unlikely to be a spiritual force for modernizing China's economy. The question is not one of deeming the Chinese "naturally ungifted" for the demands of capitalism. The varied conditions, which arguably strongly favored the origin of capitalism in China, did not suffice to create such an economic system.¹⁸ This failure demonstrates that the Confucian status quo was and is unable to initiate any drastic change of the traditional socioeconomic order toward capitalism. Even though there are growing challenges to Weber, the impact of Confucianism on modernization in Chinese society is not the same as that of Protestantism in Europe. Yet Confucian culture does contain some seeds of transformation. However, only within the appropriate political and institutional setting could the seeds bear fruit so as to influence posi-

¹⁶International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: October 1998* (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund Publication Services, 1998), 6-7.

¹⁷Harry Harding, "The Concept of Greater China: Themes, Variations, and Reservations," *The China Quarterly*, no. 136 (December 1993): 664.

¹⁸See note 14 above.

tively the course of China's economic development.

The seeds of transformation emphasize the importance of family values, such as filial piety, respect for elders, and loyalty. The bottom-up family values are a collection of social and ethical codes in support of social and economic actions. The basic social unit of the Confucian system is the well-ordered family, not the individual. The family is a microcosm of the sociopolitical order; the wise father is a model for the wise ruler and dutiful children are the models for properly submissive subjects who know their obligations to others. In the family, respect for elders, filial piety to parents, and loyalty to those in authority become the ethical codes of care. As a consequence, the motivational drive for material wealth and social status has created pragmatic and rationalizing attitudes toward economic activities. These Confucian family values persist in China, regardless of changes in political institutions and environments over time.

On the other hand, such seeds were unable to sustain modernization, partly because China was an agrarian state. There was a clear-cut distinction between what the Chinese call the "root" (agriculture) and the "branch" (commerce). China's social and economic thinking and policy focused on the utilization and distribution of land rather than commerce. Thus, the status of merchants remained much lower than that of farmers. The merchants never became a dominant class in China.

Upon establishing its rule over the mainland, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set the objective of modernization: the catching up with Britain and the United States. However, Confucian family codes and emphasis on the "root" ("taking grain as the key link") remained intact. To achieve this ambitious objective, China concentrated resources on the reconstruction of the economy. Yet traditional values thwarted the ambition to create a modernization miracle. In the 1990s, the "miracle" occurred because of political and economic reforms, foreign investment, technology transfer, and market demands. In other words, culture does not create modernization. Material and cultural power jointly governs China's economic development.

Again, the "China economic threat" is largely based on the misperception of the causal connections between culture and modernization. These presumed connections have failed to provide hostage against Ameri-

can economic strength. On the contrary, China orchestrated a massive disinformation effort, originally to mask its economic weakness, and later to exaggerate its strength; China now claims that it is the seventh largest economy, the eleventh largest trade power, and—at US\$145 billion—has amassed the second largest foreign reserves.¹⁹ Centered on domestic politics, the campaigns may have encouraged the exaggerated specters of the "China economic threat" abroad. However, advocates of the "China threat" and even China itself underestimate the dilemmas that the Chinese economy faces.

Chinese reforms are designed to preserve rather than eliminate the core of the socialist economy—state firms and state banks—by introducing change along the margins. The efforts to build a socialist market economy are associated with other phenomena, such as the weakening of external demand, past overbuilding or excess inventory accumulation, devastating floods, high rates of unemployment in both urban and rural areas, and the fact that 42 million peasants and 20 million urban residents remain under the poverty line.²⁰ Continued low productivity and efficiency rates frustrate both the private and public sectors. Economic growth relies heavily on increases in inputs, such as rising educational levels and massive investment in physical capital. Mere increase in monetary or material inputs, without an increase in productivity and the efficiency with which those inputs are used, inevitably translates into poor returns. Clearly, China's high economic growth is based on an astonishing mobilization of resources. The rate of efficiency growth, however, is not only unspectacular, but is well below the rates achieved in East Asian and Western economies. China's "miracle" depends on resource-oriented and labor-intensive industries.

The most egregious error made by Huntington and his followers is to propagate the independent causal effect concept of China's economic impact on the United States. Such a causal model—often used to portray Chinese and East Asian modernization—simply does not do justice to the

¹⁹ *People's Daily*, August 18, 1999, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1999, 1.



complexities and nuances of the relationship. The real issue is more problematic. Why were the Confucian values of rational adjustment to the given world unable to modernize the Chinese economy over the last twenty-five centuries, only now to be thought to promote economic modernization? Does Confucian culture have a persistent impact on Chinese modernization and, by extension, on issues of U.S. economic hegemony? If so, under what conditions does this relationship hold true? None of these questions are explicitly asked or answered by "Confucian culture threat" advocates.

On the other hand, there is little in the literature to show how Confucian culture has been transformed by the Beijing regime, whether through political processes (such as political socialization, education, and media) or economic processes (such as the mobilization of resources, encouraging the sacrificing of individual interests, and the introduction of new production methods) to make it compatible with Chinese modernization. This continuity and change pattern is no mere esoteric academic controversy, but touches on critical debates on culture and behavior. Huntington's untestable hypothesis itself questions his deterministic "Confucian culture threat" theory.

The Military Threat

Miscalculated Chinese culture and strategic behavior have strengthened Huntington's misperceptions of the eventual military confrontation with China. Even worse, the postulated Confucian-Islamic connection is seen as designed to oppose the West on weapons proliferation and facilitate exchanges, such as weapons transfers from China to Islamic states; the facile premise is that Confucius and Muhammad were "anti-West." A major war is feared, if the United States challenges China's rise. War between the United States and China might lead the West to a final assault across the Great Wall to Beijing, Manchuria, and the Han heartland.²¹

²¹Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 239, 313-16.

Again and again, Huntington's Cold War sentiment portrays a quintessentially peace-oriented Confucian culture as militant and anti-Western, although Confucius himself never knew there was a "West" under Heaven.

In a ranking of strategic choices, Confucian culture prefers a non-violent strategy over violent offensive or defensive ones. This preference ranking reflects the belief in "*zi weizheng, yanyong sha*" ("In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill?").²² The belief is rooted in such ideas as self-cultivation, ordered society, and virtuous government under Heaven, which may help maintain harmony and eliminate potential conflict. The gaining of victory without the use of force or simply through psychological warfare alone is not utopian fantasy, but part of the larger view that seeks to ensure the reestablished order peacefully. This approach is also associated with self-protection through use of walls, earthworks, and strategic strong points rather than through invasion, a predisposition highlighting the security imperatives of an agricultural society. To be sure, Confucius himself does not oppose necessary military preparation for self-defense, but sees moral education as sufficient to transform potential enemies into willing and submissive allies. Weapons, then, become tools of ill omen. "The Master said of the *shao* that it was both perfectly beautiful and perfectly good, and of the *wu* that it was perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good."²³ Misunderstanding of Confucian strategic ideas and of the business interaction between China and Islamic countries leads Huntington to discussions of the so-called Confucian-Islamic connection. It is true that Beijing sells weapons to Islamic countries, yet the United States sells weapons to Taiwan. Regardless of whatever defensive and offensive reasons might prevail, do such sales constitute the Confucian-American (Western) connection? If so, how can Huntington explain this conceptual dilemma—the Confucian-American (Western) connection versus the Confucian-Islamic connection? Is Confucianism pro-West, pro-

²²Confucius, *The Analects*, 115.

²³*Shao* and *wu* are ballad names. The music of *shao* tells of a story about Shun who came to the throne through the abdication of Yao, whereas the music of King Wu relates a story about King Wu who came to the throne through overthrowing the Yin by military force. See Confucius, *The Analects*, 71.

Islam, or both? Are there any basic criteria for defining Confucius? Apparently, such questions are beyond his ability to answer.

The *Report of the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China* ("The Cox Report") further tries to justify the "Confucian culture threat" theory through the assessment of "China's espionage and other illegal activities." Beijing is said to systematically seek advanced dual-purpose technology from the United States in order to achieve its strategic goals, which are seen to include incorporating Taiwan into China and becoming the primary power in East Asia. China's ambitious military modernization programs are described as involving development of space-based weapons, mobile nuclear weapons, attack submarines, fighter aircraft, precision-guided weapons, and rapid reaction ground forces.

The most serious allegation accuses China of stealing classified information on every thermonuclear warhead in the U.S. ballistic missile arsenal, including the W88 design characteristics used for the U.S. Navy's Trident II missile warhead, as well as classified nuclear weapons computer codes (mathematical models of the physical characteristics of a nuclear explosion) from American nuclear weapons laboratories. China's successful test in 1999 of a road-mobile missile—Dongfeng-31—presented as demonstration and proof, makes China and Russia the only two countries with virtually undetectable forces, and gives Beijing a major strike capability immune from a preemptive take-out, and poses a significant threat not only to U.S. forces deployed in the Pacific theater, but also to portions of the continental United States and many American allies.²⁴

The Cox Report shows deep concerns about potential security vulnerabilities. Fears of inferiority, technological breakthroughs, and possible surprise attacks are heightened when the strategic confrontation is rigid, established by the parameters of time and destructive power. The growing military muscle magnifies the sense of military threat posed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in East Asia. Clearly, China makes great efforts to modernize its nuclear force, now armed with two dozen liquid-fueled

²⁴"The Cox Report" (cited in note 2 above).

nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles. The replacement of the inaccurate, slow-to-respond missiles with more accurate, quicker-reacting, solid-propellant ones (both submarine-launched and ground-mobile) is scheduled for completion before 2010. Mobility sharply reduces the force's vulnerability to a disarming first strike. Shifting to solid fuels leads the PLA to the next step of its modernization project—developing smaller, lighter warheads with better yield-to-weight ratios than its old missiles. The developments accelerate the designing and manufacturing of multiple, independently targetable warheads, which can be mounted on a single launcher.

China is upgrading its naval and air fleets. The Navy, despite technical and technological difficulties, has indigenously designed Han-class nuclear attack submarines and Xia-class ballistic missile nuclear submarines. The 4,200-ton Luhu and newly launched 6,900-ton Luhai destroyers are equipped with American and Ukrainian gas turbine engines, Yingji surface-to-surface missiles, a French Crotale surface-to-air missile system, Italian torpedoes, German electrical systems, Zhi-9 (French Dauphin) helicopters, and Chinese decoy launchers. The Dayun-class resupply vessels, with a displacement of 11,000 tons, also carry two Super Frelon Sa-321 helicopters for vertical replenishment at sea. Russian 877EKM Kilo class and the modified version of 636 Kilo-class conventional attack submarines and Sovremenny-class destroyers armed with the SS-N-22/Sunburn ASCM will strengthen combat capabilities.

The Air Force now has Sukhoi-27 fighters, S-300PMU air defense missiles, Mi-6 transport helicopters, Ilyushin-76 heavy transports, and refueling tankers. Russia licensed coproduction of the Su-27s to the Shenyang Aircraft Corporation which is able to produce fifteen to twenty planes per year and has agreed to sell fifty Su-30MK fighters equipped with both medium-range air-to-air missiles and long-range air-to-surface missiles.

The Army is strengthening its aviation units, which have Mi-17 helicopter gunships, Zhi-9 helicopter gunships, Mi-8 and Mi-171 transport helicopters, and U.S. UH-60 helicopters.²⁵

²⁵ *People's Daily*, October 1, 1999, 2; and *Jane's Defense Weekly*, December 16, 1998, 26-27; December 23, 1998, 15; February 3, 1999, 16; February 24, 1999, 16.

The rapidly modernized PLA compounds U.S. fears: the Chinese military's tradition of overinsurance, offensive military posture, heavy and continued commitment to technology-centered military building, and counterforce deterrent strategy all magnify such fears and contribute to worst-case conflict scenarios.

Cox's assessment of the potential threats to U.S. national security is just the latest major blow to the Sino-American relationship. China insists that its weapons be based on indigenous, not stolen technology. A well-documented article, published by the China Information Office, has denied the contrary allegations. The idea of an enhanced radiation weapon (commonly known as the neutron bomb) was introduced by Chinese scientists in 1964. After a decade of research and tests, China successfully produced neutron bombs in the mid-1970s. As a result of technological innovations, the cost of the bomb has been substantially reduced and is less than half that of the 1970s. China has mastered miniaturized technologies and can manufacture tapered warheads according to operational requirement.

In addition, China's satellite and missile technology is quite mature, having launched the first satellite in 1970 and tested submarine-launched, solid-fueled missiles in 1982.²⁶ Beijing contends that its purpose is not to match Washington, but to build sufficient forces so that no one could threaten China with conventional or nuclear weapons without fear of reprisal. As Beijing's search is only for a survivable, limited, punitive second-strike capability, stealing such technologies from the United States is unnecessary.

Meanwhile, China has launched verbal counterattacks, accusing the United States of spying on China's weapons programs, including those for CSS-2, -3, -4, -5, -6, -7, -8, and -52 ballistic missiles; DF-31 intercontinental ballistic missiles; JL-1 and JL-2 submarine-launched missiles; C801 and C802 surface-to-surface missiles; YH-4 cruise missiles; K-8 aircraft; F-10 fighters; Zhi-11 helicopters; airborne warning planes; FSW, FSW-1, and FSW-2 spy satellites; and 094 nuclear submarines.²⁷ These attacks and

²⁶*People's Daily*, July 16, 1999, 1, 3.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 3.

counterattacks deepen mutual misperceptions and suspicions.

The major shortcoming of the Cox Report is an inability to explain how China has stolen U.S. nuclear, missile, and satellite secrets and the extent to which China uses such secrets to improve its weaponry. The allegations, moreover, highlight a peculiar feature of U.S. behavior. In the eyes of Beijing, Washington attempts to "perform as an imperial power determining the fate of other people, yet at the same time [acts] as if America were the aggrieved party, acting defensively to save the world, not offensively to control it."²⁸ The "China military threat" to the United States is not real in any meaningful sense, but the language of the alleged threat is manipulated to perpetuate Washington's position as the dominant hegemonic power. Thus, the threat perception is a product of certain constellations of political forces which have come together to place the "China military threat" on the U.S. political agenda. Containment then becomes the bottom line of American rhetoric and action in East Asia.

The "China military threat," embedded in Confucian culture, is to see Beijing's behavior as more centralized, planned, and coordinated than is actually the case and to project such an image into the foreseeable future. This threat assessment fails to conceptualize the relationship between culture and strategic behavior and fails to identify how culture, together with allegedly stolen military secrets and technology, produces and sustains such threats to the United States. In fact, this assessment simply highlights a security dilemma: upgraded defensive programs undertaken by Beijing and Washington are each seen by the other side as offensive and threatening.

China remains a regional power. Its primary security interests relate to its neighbors, rather than to a distant superpower. Efforts to maintain regional stability compatible with Confucian ideals are the priority of China's modernization. To achieve this objective, China flexibly uses peaceful and military approaches to, and methods of, solving security issues.

On the one hand, Beijing seeks to build its own regional security

²⁸ Alan Wolf, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1984), 21.

framework. China has, for instance, proposed the joint development of the Diaoyutai Islands with Japan. The Shanghai Accord and the New Delhi Accord have fostered confidence-building measures among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and India. Beijing has also expressed willingness to discuss territorial issues with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), based on mutual respect, equality, and the rule of law.²⁹

On the other hand, China is interested in demonstrating its military muscle in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait in order to deter any unwanted conflict. Use of force remains real. Beijing's regional security framework favors its self-interests and terms, softly challenging the dominance of the United States and other powers in East Asia. This low-risk, low-intensity competition is likely to shape and dominate regional security.

Conclusion

The miscalculated growth of China's strength—both cultural and material—and the resulting fears and vulnerabilities caused by this miscalculation have fostered Washington's misperceptions of Confucian culture and China's behavior. Moreover, efforts to reshape such misperceived behavior and culture have reinforced Beijing's suspicions about Washington's China policy and, thus, have undermined bilateral relations. Advocates and opponents become victims and agents of the "Confucian culture threat" theory, a fear which will have a strong reverberating impact on regional stability in the twenty-first century.

The important contribution of the "Confucian culture threat" advocates is to raise the question of how to deal with an emerging superpower. The rise of a great power eventually replaces the fall of a great power. However, their assessment of power capabilities (both cultural and material) is not based on rationality, but on their bias and sometime racist accusations. The fundamental weakness of the threat theory is the unfalsi-

²⁹*People's Daily*, April 27, 1996, 1; November 29, 1996, 1; and August 26, 1999, 1.

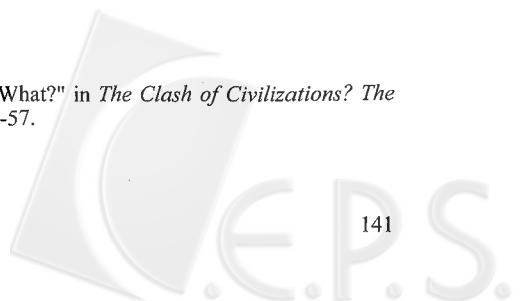
fied causal connections between culture and behavior. Huntington is right to insist that "intellectual and scientific advance consist of the displacement of one paradigm, which becomes increasingly incapable of explaining new or newly discovered facts, by a new paradigm that accounts for the facts in a more satisfactory fashion."³⁰ But he is wrong to ignore the fact that his paradigm neither explains nor accounts for the new facts and that his paradigm must be accepted by a scientific community, rather than by individual scientists. This methodological issue severely undermines the utility of his theory.

Moreover, Confucian culture itself is controversial in China. The consensus among radical scholars is that, in Lu Xun's words, Confucianism is "cannibalistic ritualism." What Confucian culture has given the Chinese is not a national spirit of enterprise, a system of laws, or a mechanism of cultural renewal, but a fearsome self-killing machine that, as it degenerated, constantly devoured its best and its brightest, the culture's own vital elements.³¹ This anti-Confucian culture shapes modern Chinese history.

Conversely, the most extraordinary achievement of the "Confucian culture threat" opponents is just to remind regional powers that China is a developing country, despite its rapid development. A dilemma Beijing faces now, however, lies in the asymmetry between domestic and regional politics. On the domestic front, China exaggerates both its capabilities of catching up with developed countries in the next couple of decades as well as its achievements made during economic reforms. The resulting effect is that the Chinese increasingly see their country as a global power in the sense of its status—a nuclear power and a member of the United Nations Security Council. This propaganda objective is designed to meet Chinese psychological demands. On the international front, however, China vigorously denies that its modernization and achievements will change the balance of power and threaten the vital interests of other regional powers. Despite great efforts, this posture does in fact spark fears of China's po-

³⁰Samuel P. Huntington, "If Not Civilizations, What?" in *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (New York: Foreign Affairs, 1996), 56-57.

³¹Tu, "Cultural China," 26.



litical, economic, and military potential. The imbalance between the two fronts nurtures suspicions and produces the misperceptions of the "Confucian culture threat" that we now face.

Wherever one turns, China is at odds with itself. The simple causal model of culture and behavior cannot fully explain the subtleties and complications that characterize the relations between China and the United States, and the dynamic interaction between domestic and regional politics, even though such a focus may partially capture some salient aspects. Harmony, an independent variable, remains a dominant theme of Confucian culture, but Chinese politics, development, and perceptions of security needs and requirements all continue to reshape this harmony-oriented culture in pursuit of strategic preferences and choices. In order to foster mutual understanding, peace, and prosperity, imperative is to institutionalize East Asian security cooperation.