

## China Fashions a Maritime Identity

JAMES R. HOLMES

*How will an emerging, increasingly sea-power-minded China manage its relations with seafaring neighbors in Asia? This study uses the international relations concepts of "identity" and "strategic culture" to appraise China's emerging diplomacy as it pertains to maritime affairs. A nation's strategic culture at once shapes and can be shaped by the thoughts and actions of important decision-makers. A nation-state's leaders thus can craft a certain identity, conveying how the nation-state will conduct itself in international affairs. This has both domestic and international uses. China's rulers have set out to rally the populace behind their quest for sea power—a quest they see as vital for economic development—and to assuage concerns among fellow Asian sea powers over the naval arms buildup China has undertaken in recent years. Are they sincere in their professions of benevolence? This study examines possible futures for China's maritime diplomacy, concluding that China's leadership neither shrinks from the use of force nor views it as a first resort. Rather, China's leaders will manage their nation's identity and strategic culture prudently in the service of their interests. A welcoming but watchful attitude befits Asian powers surveying China's maritime rise.*

**KEYWORDS:** identity; strategic culture; maritime strategy; Zheng He; PLA Navy.

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### The Uses of a Usable Past



Impelled by its real and growing dependence on foreign supplies of oil, natural gas, and other commodities—supplies transported predominantly by sea—China has turned its strategic gaze to the seas for the first time in centuries. As it does so, leaders in Beijing are busily fashioning what historian Henry Steele Commager would call a "usable past" to justify an increasingly ambitious maritime strategy to China's traditionally land-oriented populace and to ease worries such a strategy might arouse in Asian capitals—preventing the emergence of the counterbalancing coalition international relations (IR) theory would predict. Commager explains how early Americans, starting anew in the Western Hemisphere, went about creating a historical narrative of their own. They crafted a heroic past, deliberately stimulating an American nationalism to bind the new republic together. And they did so with dispatch. "Nothing," writes Commager, "is more impressive than the speed and the lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past," manifest in history, legends, and heroes, not to mention cultural artifacts such as paintings and patriotic ballads.<sup>1</sup>

America's newfound history and traditions left an indelible stamp on the nation's identity, defined as its "basic character" by three prominent scholars.<sup>2</sup> Whether the founding generation and its immediate successors intended it or not, the traits imparted to the nation served both international

<sup>1</sup>See Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3-27. Commager's view of common history, traditions, and legends is consistent with scholarship on ethnonationalism. See, for instance, Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1993); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991); and Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 33.



and domestic purposes, giving foreign peoples a glimpse into how the United States would conduct its affairs. Some of the central characteristics of the new republic included (1) a visceral dread of temporal or religious tyranny, exemplified by suspicion of standing armies and the determination to constrain individual power centers; (2) a belief that the nation had a special destiny, separate from that of Europe; and (3) a conviction that the United States should shun political entanglements with the European powers that might embroil it in wars inimical to its interests. The "great rule of conduct" enunciated in George Washington's famous Farewell Address urged Americans to abstain from great-power intrigues, which had at most "a very remote relation" to their interests. After a period of domestic consolidation, proclaimed Washington, the United States might "choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel."<sup>3</sup>

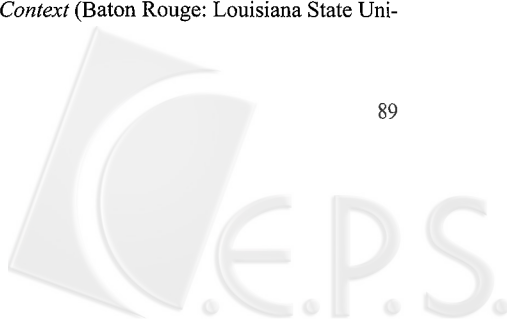
This all conveyed a dislike of foreign adventures. Despite the changes the nation underwent in ensuing decades, the image of America as a self-denying great power, generally reluctant to indulge in territorial aggrandizement or military dominion, endured into the twentieth century. And it endured despite the "great aberration," a spasm of territorial acquisitions following the Spanish-American War.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, burgeoning power and Americans' sometimes high-handed attitudes grated on sentiments overseas, particularly among the United States' neighbors in Latin America.<sup>5</sup> Still, the image of a great power relatively free of land hunger

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<sup>3</sup>George Washington, "Farewell Address" (1796), U.S. State Department website, <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/49.htm>. For a sampling of commentary on early America, see Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin, 1961), esp. 77-84, 320-25; Thomas Paine, *The Thomas Paine Reader*, ed. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 1987), 65-115; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: HarperPerennial, 1988), esp. 226-30; and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 55-93.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, revised edition (New York: Henry Holt, 1942), 463-78. Bemis titled the chapter on the Spanish-American War and its aftermath "The Great Aberration of 1898."

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, Richard H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt's Caribbean: The Panama Canal, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Latin American Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).



outlived the end of the Cold War, which left the United States alone atop a unipolar world order. Confounding realist predictions, no alliance or coalition has yet emerged to oppose American hegemony, even though Washington's handling of foreign policy has rankled with allies and erstwhile adversaries alike—especially during the George W. Bush presidency. While America possesses the means to pose a threat, its lack of any apparent deep-seated proclivity for doing so helps explain the world's muted response to American preeminence.

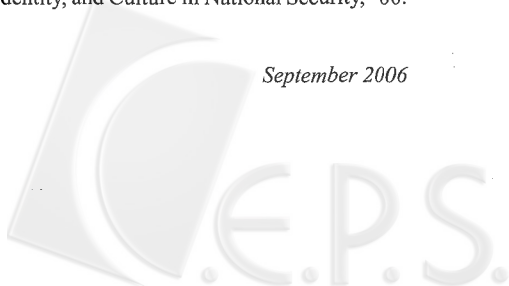
In short, America's identity bore the imprint of its usable history, cultural markers, and traditions. This not only united the American people but signaled to foreign countries that, by the standards of past great powers, their republic had little zeal for power politics or territorial aggrandizement.<sup>6</sup> The new nation-state's identity created certain expectations about American behavior that reduced the consternation the United States' own nineteenth-century rise to great-power status stirred up in foreign capitals. Unsurprisingly, American statesmen across the political spectrum have gone out of their way to preserve this distinctive national character.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, contemporary China, which has turned its attentions to the seas in its quest for national unity and energy security, has an interest in forging a benevolent, self-denying identity of its own, both to rally public support for seafaring ventures and to serve foreign-policy purposes. Its reliance on oil, gas, and other seaborne commodities has beckoned Beijing's gaze inexorably seaward. Having seen its ideological appeal sag since the end of the Cold War, China's communist regime believes it must sustain the nation's impressive economic performance to provide the comforts development brings. In effect Beijing hopes to substitute prosperity for ideological fervor, bestowing new legitimacy on Communist Party rule.

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<sup>6</sup>Reginald Stuart explores the "war myth" that the United States, throughout its history, has only embarked on moralistic crusades that culminate in total war. In reality, contends Stuart persuasively, the American Founders' thinking inclined strongly to limited wars of the kind envisioned by the Prussian strategic theorist Carl von Clausewitz. See Reginald C. Stuart, *War and American Thought: From the Revolution to the Monroe Doctrine* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1982), 182-94. See also Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," 60.

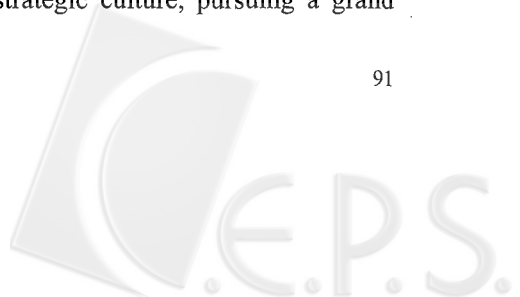


Economic imperatives at home, then, have riveted Chinese leaders' attentions on the security of the sea lanes that convey the stuff of modern economic life from suppliers in the Middle East and Africa into Chinese seaports. The survival of the regime could turn on China's ability to devise a grand strategy upholding its interests on the high seas.

As it integrates a nautical element into its strategic thinking, Beijing understands that fellow Asian powers and the United States, whose navy has ruled the waves in the region since World War II, will tend to look askance at a more expansive Chinese grand strategy—a strategy backed by the naval and military buildup China has undertaken in recent years. Calming fears that might prompt the formation of a countervailing coalition, perhaps under U.S. leadership, thus has become a matter of some importance to the success of China's grand strategy. Accordingly, Beijing is attempting to use the past to realign the nation's identity and "strategic culture" with today's exigencies, portraying China as an intrinsically peaceful maritime power. Emphasizing the feats of past Chinese seafarers such as the Ming Dynasty (明朝) explorer Zheng He (鄭和), who roamed Asian waters six centuries ago without attempting military conquest, is one means to this end.

The kind of maritime identity China's leadership crafts will say much about how China will fit into the international order now taking shape in Asia. What motivates Beijing? Prediction is a hazardous business, but at least three analytically distinct scenarios are plausible, each commanding considerable support among scholars:

1. Reared on China's traditions of pacifism and aversion to the offensive use of force, Chinese leaders hew to a nonviolent grand strategy that regards military force as a last resort. John King Fairbank, a leading exponent of this view, famously depicted force as a "disesteemed" implement of foreign policy for Chinese leaders. Chinese diplomacy seeks to propagate a maritime identity conforming to Fairbank's assessment.
2. Chinese leaders are not captives of culture but enjoy some flexibility to manipulate China's strategic culture, pursuing a grand



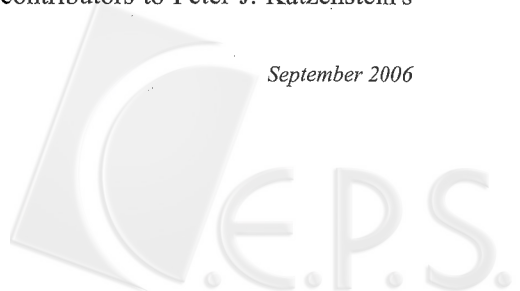
strategy premised on *realpolitik* while reassuring fellow sea powers of their beneficent intentions. While they differ on how strategic culture operates, Iain Johnston and Colin Gray, to name two prominent theorists, agree that action independent of culture is possible.

3. Chinese elites sincerely believe that their nation-state is incapable of acting against its pacifist traditions, even when it uses force offensively or preemptively. Andrew Scobell, who has advanced such a view, writes of a "Chinese Cult of Defense," a sort of mindset under which Chinese leaders can use force aggressively while fervently maintaining—and apparently believing—that their actions are defensive.

This paper analyzes the context surrounding these scenarios, in full recognition that there are no pat answers. China's leaders, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, are likely driven by mixed, changeable motives. Even so, the policy implications of each scenario are quite different for the Asian nations and the United States—making this an exercise worth undertaking. One imponderable raised by this analysis is whether China's venerable culture will prove as susceptible to elite modification as that of early America, which in essence gave the founding generation a *tabula rasa*. Can political and military leaders reorient China's culture seaward without some event significant enough to disturb the nation's cultural equilibrium, allowing a new, marine equilibrium to form? Will China's history be usable, or will it be inescapable?

### **The Influence of Identity and Culture**

A few theoretical observations are in order to clarify these matters. What is identity in international affairs, how does it work, and how susceptible is it to conscious manipulation by decision-makers? I mingle concepts from the literature on identity freely with those taken from the literature on "strategic culture" (as indeed do the contributors to Peter J. Katzenstein's



well-known volume *The Culture of National Security*, among them Alastair Iain Johnston, a specialist in Chinese strategic culture).<sup>8</sup> These authors differ on certain points, at times bitterly. However, even discordant views tend to enliven analyses of Chinese identity and culture, helping Asian sea powers foresee possible futures for China's grand strategy, along with variables that could influence these futures in one direction or another and strategies Asian leaders should consider. Scholars of strategic culture agree on the most elemental point—that "the security environments in which states are embedded are in part cultural and institutional, rather than just material."<sup>9</sup> Thus their observations make a useful analytical prism through which to evaluate China's maritime identity.<sup>10</sup>

The first such observation: that nation-states have distinctive identities and play certain roles in the international system. This insight represents a sharp break with IR scholars' habitual reliance on material, quantifiable factors to account for the behavior of states.<sup>11</sup> The makeup of a

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 32-64; and Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), esp. 1-31, 61-108.

<sup>9</sup>Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," 33.

<sup>10</sup>For a thorough review of the literature on strategic culture, see Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and National Security Policy," *International Studies Review* 4, no. 3 (December 2002): 87-113; and Toshi Yoshihara, "Chinese Strategic Culture and Military Innovation: From the Nuclear to the Information Age" (Ph.D. dissertation, Fletcher School, Tufts University, 2004), 13-62.

<sup>11</sup>For instance, IR scholars of realist inclinations, most prominently Kenneth Waltz, contend that lesser powers tend to band together to counterbalance the rise of a new, potentially dominant great power. More recently, some scholars of Asian politics have declared that balance-of-power politics is primarily a Western phenomenon, and that the Asian system inclines less to balancing than to hierarchy. For an overview of the realist analysis, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 44-79; and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). For a sample of other realist analyses, see Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1993/94): 5-33; Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War," *ibid.*, 34-77; and Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *ibid.*, 22, no. 3 (Winter 1997/98): 36-73. For a rejoinder to the realists, see David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 57-85; and David C. Kang, "Hierarchy in Asian International Relations: 1300-1900," *Asian Security* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 53-79.



nation-state and the associated society, then, derives not only from external factors but from the traditions, attitudes, and habits of mind that are fundamental to how a society conducts its affairs. Ideas count.

Second, a nation-state's identity is a complex thing, made up of a *mélange* of ideas and traditions—intellectual and emotional factors that at times may coexist uneasily or even contradict one another. And identity is not immutable, even though many strategic-culture theorists imply that each nation-state has a more or less static "core" strategic culture that is highly resistant to change. A more supple view is in order. As Commager's notion of a *usable* past implies, elites may put history, traditions, and symbols to work, serving their own ends while inscribing their own ideas on the nation-state's character and the role it is perceived to play in the international system. Observes Johnston: "Traditions are constantly redefined and reinterpreted by successive generations of elites with a political interest in highlighting or downplaying particular traditions."<sup>12</sup> Johnston also points out that the complex interplay of geography, culture, and strategic experience can give rise to multiple strategic cultures. If so, certain traits eclipse others at certain times in a society's history, depending on circumstances.<sup>13</sup> In effect this offers elites adept at public diplomacy a menu of options, helping them draw out cultural characteristics that align with their chosen political objectives, policies, and grand strategy.

Third, as ruling elites manipulate identity and culture, they generate expectations about how the nation-state will conduct itself in domestic and international settings. In part this is because culture, though not entirely intractable, changes more slowly than political conditions do—giving a nation-state's behavior a measure of predictability. This view finds support in the work of Charles Kupchan, who observes that elites can use language that resonates with the populace to create popular support for particular strategic choices.<sup>14</sup> Kupchan finds that both status quo and revisionist

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<sup>12</sup>Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 10.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>14</sup>Charles Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1-32.





powers are prone to imprudent, "self-defeating behavior" toward prospective rivals—that is, to pursuing their interests in an overly cooperative or an overly competitive manner.<sup>15</sup> In large part, he says, this is because elites tend to rouse public demands they cannot fulfill—for prestige and influence on the part of rising powers, for preservation of existing prerogatives on the part of established powers.<sup>16</sup>

Kupchan defines strategic culture more narrowly than did Jack Snyder, who coined the term in the 1970s, defining it as "the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and perceptual parameters of strategic debate."<sup>17</sup> For Kupchan, strategic culture is "the realm of national identity and national self-image," consisting of:

images and symbols that shape how a polity understands its relationship between metropolitan security and empire, conceives of its position in the international hierarchy, and perceives the nature and scope of the nation's external ambition. These images and symbols at once *mold public attitudes and become institutionalized and routinized in the structure and process of decision making*.... Inasmuch as strategic culture shapes the boundaries of politically legitimate behavior in the realm of foreign policy and affects how elites conceive of the national interest and set strategic priorities, it plays a *crucial role in shaping grand strategy*.<sup>18</sup>

This definition supplies the crucial link between the abstract concepts of identity and culture and the concrete behavior of elites and governmental

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>16</sup>For the sake of avoiding clutter, I have avoided bringing strategic theory into this analysis. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that the notion of using strategic culture to amass public support for particular decisions is consistent with Carl von Clausewitz's notion of the "paradoxical trinity." Clausewitz proclaimed that wise statesmen must manage the government, the armed forces, and the people in order to maintain a cohesive war effort. Language and concepts derived from a society's traditions offer political and military leaders a mechanism to influence the citizenry, which the Prussian theorist depicted as the province of primordial passions. This conception of the public helps explain why political leaders can find it difficult to control public expectations they have created. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed., trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

<sup>17</sup>Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1977), 9.

<sup>18</sup>Kupchan, *Vulnerability of Empire*, 5-6. Emphasis added.



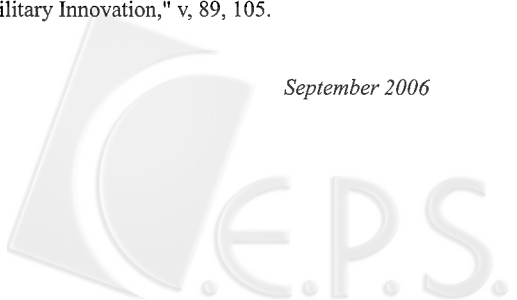
institutions. Kupchan finds the influence of culture especially pronounced in times of change. When elites are "faced with the need to make immediate, discrete policy choices to respond to changes in the external environment," such as shifts in the international distribution of power and influence, they are typically "guided in their allocation of military and economic resources by strategic beliefs and domestic political forces."<sup>19</sup>

In short, as members of the larger society, members of the elite are influenced by the prevailing strategic culture; they use concepts derived from that culture to shape public attitudes; and they find themselves working within the constraints of strategic culture—constraints they themselves help create through their advocacy on behalf of a distinctive vision of the nation-state's basic character, or identity. Argues Colin Gray, a member of the founding generation of strategic-culture theorists, culture permeates ideas and behavior, providing "context" for strategy-making at all levels:

Strategic culture should be approached both as a shaping context for behaviour and itself as a constituent of that behaviour.... both [people and institutions] have internalized strategic culture and in part construct, interpret, and amend that culture. In other words, the strategic cultural context for strategic behaviour includes the human strategic actors and their institutions which "make culture" by interpreting what they discern.... Strategic culture is not only "out

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<sup>19</sup>For the sake of analytical clarity, many analysts have confined strategic culture solely to the realm of military strategy. For instance, Alan Macmillan, Ken Booth, and Russell Trood maintain that if strategy "is allowed to mean more than the *military* dimension of *security*, then the word simply becomes synonymous with security, and so loses its special meaning.... In this event, *strategic* culture simply becomes synonymous with *political* culture. This, most will agree, would not be helpful" (their emphasis). One virtue of Charles Kupchan's analysis is that he does not limit strategic culture to military affairs but widens it to consider how states use diplomatic, economic, and ideological instruments alongside the military instrument. If we allow for the concept of grand strategy, we must allow for culture to function at the grand strategic level. Alastair Iain Johnston makes a similar assumption. Colin Gray, despite sharp differences with Johnston in many areas, argues that culture provides "context" that suffuses all aspects of strategy-making, not just the military domain. And, in a similar vein, Toshi Yoshihara envisions a comprehensive "hierarchy of strategy," which is expressed as an interlinked set of preferences that flow from grand strategy to operations and tactics." See Alan Macmillan, Ken Booth, and Russell Trood, "Strategic Culture," in *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Ken Booth and Russell Trood (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), esp. 10-11; Kupchan, *Vulnerability of Empire*, 7-8; Johnston, *Cultural Realism*; Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 49-69; and Yoshihara, "Chinese Strategic Culture and Military Innovation," v, 89, 105.



there," also it is within us; we, our institutions, and our behaviour, are the context.<sup>20</sup>

Hence strategic culture has a circular quality to it. Expectations flowing from national identity, traditions, and habits of mind allow ruling elites to set the terms of national discourse, but past expectations entrenched in public attitudes and institutions fetter elites' strategic options. It clearly takes effort for a nation-state's leadership to press identity and culture into the service of grand strategy. Traits anchored deeply in history, tradition, and the national psyche might not be so plastic as Charles Kupchan and like-minded scholars aver. Indeed, Kupchan himself attributes self-defeating behavior on the part of rising and established empires to elites' inability to modify strategic culture quickly enough to keep pace with change in the international system, managing the expectations they themselves have raised. Culture, then, is at once pliable and intractable.

Fourth, identity and strategic culture thus can make a useful adjunct to grand strategy—if deftly managed. These traits hint at how the nation-state will conduct its domestic and foreign affairs, creating expectations that support elites' political objectives and strategy. This applies to routine diplomacy, just as it did for Henry Steele Commager's early Americans, who wittingly or unwittingly telegraphed the nature of the country they had founded, molding expectations in foreign capitals. Consider Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," which refers to the cultural attributes, ideas, and policies that make a nation attractive to other peoples and countries, creating an atmosphere of goodwill that helps its leaders muster support for

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<sup>20</sup>Gray is responding here to criticism from Iain Johnston, who has accused Gray's generation of theorists of postulating an unfalsifiable theory of strategic culture, among other sins. If strategic culture interpenetrates both ideas and actions, maintains Johnston in essence, then there is no way to measure it scientifically. He thus attempts to confine culture to the domain of ideas in an effort to measure its influence on actions. Gray's rejoinder: "Anyone who seeks a falsifiable theory of strategic culture in the school of Johnston, commits the same error as a doctor who sees people as having entirely separable bodies and minds... we cannot understand strategic behaviour by that method, be it ever so rigorous." Agrees Ken Booth: "Theories in these subjects might become richer if less weight is given to 'rigour'." See Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context," 50, 53; and Ken Booth, "The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed," in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), 125.



their foreign-policy enterprises.<sup>21</sup> Popular discourse tends to reduce soft power to McDonald's and Hollywood, but America's open, democratic society and the associated benefits furnish the nation a major reservoir of soft power.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, as the traditional "central" power in Asia, and with its economic and military power on the upswing, China enjoys sizable soft-power reserves of its own.<sup>23</sup> If the United States or China can convince fellow nation-states it has historically played a beneficent role in the international system and still hews to its self-denying traditions, it can reduce the realist propensity toward a balancing coalition. Its prospects for diplomatic or military success will brighten.

In short, acting in concert with the principles, beliefs, and traditions perceived to comprise their nation-state's strategic culture lends credence to ruling elites' statements of purpose. If they can show that they have adhered to principle or have behaved in a certain manner in past interactions, then their words today will carry that much more weight. And if they issue a public commitment to take this or that action—holding themselves accountable to constituents steeped in the society's identity and culture—they can tap into an especially powerful, culturally informed variant of Thomas Schelling's "commitment tactic."<sup>24</sup> If leaders bind themselves publicly,

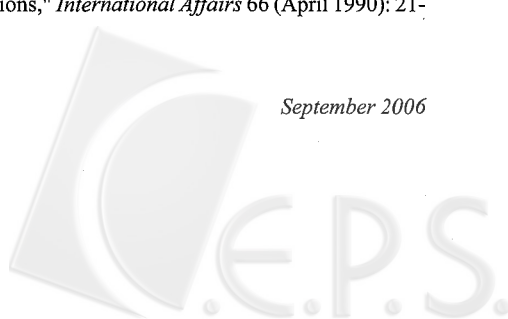
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<sup>21</sup>Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); and Joseph S. Nye, "Asia's Allure Lies in Soft Power," *Straits Times*, November 16, 2005, Taiwan Security Research website, <http://taiwansecurity.org/ST/2005/ST-161105.htm>.

<sup>22</sup>Joseph S. Nye, "The American National Interest and Global Public Goods," *International Affairs* 78, no. 2 (April 2002): 238.

<sup>23</sup>Chen Jian distinguishes usefully between "centrality" and "dominance" in Chinese political thought. He observes, "The Chinese collective memory of the 'Central Kingdom's' glorious past—remembered not just as the center of civilization, but civilization *in toto*—and the nation's humiliating experience in the modern age constituted a constant source for national mobilization in the twentieth century." For Chen, then, China's ascent to great-power status need not involve territorial conquest or military domination. See Chen Jian, *The China Challenge for the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1998), 4-8.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), esp. 21-52; and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), esp. 35-91. See also Jeffrey Z. Rubin and Jeswald W. Salacuse, "The Problem of Power in International Negotiations," *International Affairs* 66 (April 1990): 21-80.



then seem to relent on principle or go against the nation-state's basic character, they risk discrediting themselves in the eyes of the domestic populace and foreign diplomats and soldiers. Wise statesmen employ their usable past carefully.

### **An Ancient Mariner Helps China Recast Its Identity**

The exigencies of economic development have drawn the attentions of China's leadership irresistibly to the seas, inducing Beijing to remake its traditionally land-based grand strategy. To unite the Chinese populace behind seagoing pursuits, China's maritime-oriented leadership must work some cultural alchemy similar to that of the American Founders. The Chinese have regarded their nation as a purely continental power for centuries.<sup>25</sup> Mao Zedong (毛澤東) deprecated the seas, exhorting the nation to continue thinking of itself in continental terms.<sup>26</sup> For Mao, control of the waters immediately adjacent to Chinese shores was enough. During the Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) era, however, China's most senior military officer, Admiral Liu Huaqing (劉華清), urged Beijing to break with its Mao-inspired tradition of coastal defense. Liu commanded the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) throughout much of the 1980s, espousing a more assertive "offshore active defense" strategy designed to give China control of East Asian waterways, along with critical geographic nodes such as the island chains that roughly parallel China's coastline. Ultimately, around 2050, the PLA Navy will take its station as a blue-water force on a par with the U.S. Navy, putting to sea aircraft carriers and a full panoply of naval weaponry.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>On the Ming Dynasty's turn away from the oceans, see, for instance, Valerie Hansen, "China in World History 300-1500 CE," *Education About Asia* 10, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 4-7.

<sup>26</sup>For an account of China's naval efforts during the Cold War, see John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China's Strategic Sea Power: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup>Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century*



However, Admiral Liu's pleas on behalf of sea power went mostly unheard until the 1990s, when rapid economic growth impressed upon China's leadership the importance of secure sea lanes to the nation's "peaceful rise" to economic development, and ultimately to its bid for regional great-power status. With the appeal of communist ideology on the wane, the Chinese regime has increasingly sought to buttress its legitimacy and appease public sentiment by promoting economic development and the physical comforts prosperity brings. China first became a net importer of oil in 1993, and its appetite for energy has only grown since then.<sup>28</sup> Mindful of their nation's resource needs, Chinese leaders will likely modify Liu's phased maritime strategy, if they have not done so already. They will turn their strategic gaze southward, along the sea lanes that convey seaborne supplies of oil and gas—principally from the Middle East—rather than eastward, toward competition with the U.S. Navy in the broad Pacific.<sup>29</sup>

As they reorient themselves, China's strategic elites have set out to cultivate an affinity among the Chinese body politic for seagoing ventures in Southeast and South Asia, mustering popular support for oceanic endeavors while striving to allay any misgivings their naval buildup might provoke among the Asian maritime nations. Despite the nation's meager stock of maritime lore, they have set out to incorporate a seagoing element

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(Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 165-68; Jun Zhan, "China Goes to the Blue Waters: The Navy, Sea Power Mentality, and the South China Sea," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, September 1994, 180-203; and Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, "The Chinese Navy's Offshore Active Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 47, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 9-18.

<sup>28</sup>See, for instance, David Hale, "China's Growing Appetites," *National Interest*, no. 76 (Summer 2004): 137-47.

<sup>29</sup>Taiwan is of course a complicating factor in China's emerging maritime strategy, but I consider it a neutral factor in the analysis presented here. Not only does the island sit at the center-point of the first offshore island chain, potentially obstructing China's access to the Pacific high seas, but it also sits astride sea lanes connecting northern Chinese seaports with the Strait of Malacca and thence to suppliers of much-needed oil and natural gas. Either way, consequently, settling the Taiwan question on its terms will remain uppermost in the minds of China's leadership. See Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, "Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics," *Orbis* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 677-94. For a contrary view, see Robert D. Kaplan, "How We Would Fight China," *Atlantic* 295, no. 5 (June 2005): 49-64. Kaplan prophesies that the PLA will indeed surge out eastward into the Pacific, as Liu Huaqing urged.



into China's identity and strategic culture. There is some basis in antiquity for a usable Chinese nautical past. As Edward L. Dreyer points out, the Ming Dynasty, which briefly made China the mistress of Asian waters, was birthed in inland naval warfare.<sup>30</sup> Chinese leaders, more importantly, have conjured up Zheng He, the Ming "eunuch admiral," as a partner in their diplomatic enterprise. This celebrated seaman set sail six centuries ago on the first of seven voyages of diplomacy, trade, and discovery, calling at ports throughout coastal Southeast and South Asia. His expeditions advanced domestic self-interests—Zheng's master, the emperor Zhu Di (朱棣, 1360-1424), feared that the nephew he had ousted from the Dragon Throne would return from exile in search of vengeance—but they were primarily diplomatic, commercial, and scientific in nature. Chinese officials have made the pacific aspects of Zheng's cruises a mainstay of their regional diplomacy.<sup>31</sup>

Hugely popular in this centenary year, both in China and throughout maritime Asia, the ancient mariner helps Beijing reorient Chinese citizens toward the sea, instilling in them a sense of mission. "Today we are commemorating Zheng He's voyages," editorializes the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, "to promote the ethos with patriotism as the core ... to strengthen the sense of identification with Chinese civilization and ... strengthen the cohesiveness and the attraction of the Chinese nation."<sup>32</sup> Declares the *Liberation Army Daily*, the influential daily of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army:

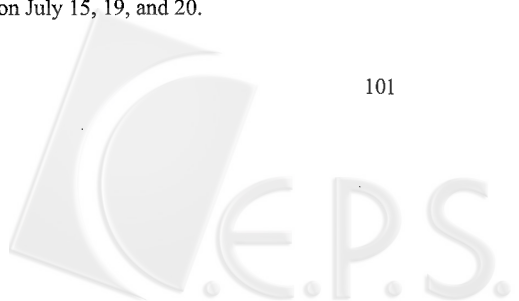
The seas are not only wide roads towards international exchange and a treasury of valuable strategic resources for sustainable human development, but are

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<sup>30</sup>Edward L. Dreyer, "The Poyang Connection, 1363: Inland Naval Warfare in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty," in *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, ed. Frank A. Kierman and John King Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 202-40.

<sup>31</sup>Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 73.

<sup>32</sup>"Carry Forward Zheng He Spirit, Promote Peace and Development," *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), July 13, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200507131477*. See also the other installments in this series, published in the *People's Daily* on July 15, 19, and 20.



also an important field in the world strategic pattern in which large powers strengthen their strategic positions and diplomatic voices. The seas have already become "new command fields" in international competition.... About 600 years ago, Zheng He led a huge fleet overseas in an effort to materialize glory and dreams through the blue waves. Today the task of materializing the blue dream of peaceful use of the seas has been assigned to our generation by history.<sup>33</sup>

By invoking Zheng, moreover, Beijing can reach out to nations along the waterways the Ming "treasure fleet"—so named for the valuables it carried to trade with foreign peoples—once plied. In so doing, it helps soothe the jitters about China's naval ambitions and remind Asian nations that China once exerted a benign, sea-based supremacy over the region. And this maritime posture is not merely for show. Beijing has steadily shifted its diplomatic stance since the 1980s, when it preferred to pursue bilateral relationships with its neighbors. It defied predictions by forging ties with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and it agreed to a code of conduct in the South China Sea. When Malaysia and Indonesia lodged strong protests against the U.S. Pacific Command's plans to use American warships to patrol the Strait of Malacca, moreover, China worked with Japan to find an alternative strategy suiting the interests of all parties. Its dexterity in maritime relations is helping Beijing build credibility.

History, then, influences China's outlook on maritime affairs, imbuing Beijing's oceanic aspirations with a sense of destiny. China's leadership now connects its grand strategy to past endeavors as a matter of routine while attempting to accommodate its maritime neighbors in multilateral dealings. In short, strategic culture is helping China's leaders sculpt an impressive program of public diplomacy, using the deeds of a venerated historical figure, backed by tangible signs of good faith, to summon up support for today's oceanic ventures.

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<sup>33</sup>*Jiefangjun bao* (Liberation Army Daily) Editorial Department, "On Our Military's Historic Missions in the New Century, New Stage—Written on the 50th Anniversary of the Founding of 'Jiefangjun Bao'," *Jiefangjun bao*, February 17, 2006, in *FBIIS-CHN-2006* 02171477.





## **Broadening China's Cultural Appeal—At Home and Abroad**

Zheng He, the embodiment of China's heroic maritime past, makes an elegant ambassador for an increasingly confident, outward-looking nation. Beijing uses Zheng's exploits to send several messages. First, Chinese leaders contend that China by its nature is a more trustworthy steward of maritime security in Asia than any Western power—namely the United States, whose naval mastery in the region reaches back six decades—could be. The tributary system over which the Dragon Throne presided during the Ming Dynasty was in considerable measure the handiwork of Zheng He, who negotiated agreements under which local potentates acknowledged Chinese suzerainty in return for certain economic and diplomatic benefits. Zheng seldom used force to uphold the system, and even then only in limited fashion. The eunuch admiral's self-restraint is a common refrain in Chinese diplomacy today, and it finds some sustenance in scholarship. Some Western observers compare the hierarchical arrangement of the Ming years favorably to the European balance-of-power system, noting that the resort to arms was relatively rare during the era of Chinese dominance.<sup>34</sup> In like manner, Chinese officials declare that their nation is intent on a peaceful rise to regional eminence, or, in Beijing's latest formula, on achieving "peaceful development."<sup>35</sup>

Chinese officials thus use Zheng's expeditions of commerce and discovery to portray China as a beneficent, non-threatening power. Chinese power, they suggest, is intrinsically self-denying, and history proves it. Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶), while visiting the United States, declared that Zheng "brought silk, tea and the Chinese culture" to foreign peoples, "but not one inch of land was occupied."<sup>36</sup> Guo Chongli (郭崇立), China's

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<sup>34</sup>See, for instance, Kang, "Hierarchy in Asian International Relations," 53-79.

<sup>35</sup>Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 18-24; and Esther Pan, "The Promise and Pitfalls of China's 'Peaceful Rise'," Council on Foreign Relations website, April 14, 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10446/>.

<sup>36</sup>Chen Jian and Zhao Haiyan, "Wen Jiabao on Sino-U.S. Relations: Cherish Harmony; Be Harmonious But Different," *Zhongguo xinwenshe* (China News Service), December 8, 2003, in *FBIS-CPP-20031208000052*.



ambassador to Kenya, proclaimed, "Zheng He's fleet [was] large.... But his voyages were not for looting resources"—code for Western imperialism—"but for friendship. In trade with foreign countries, he gave much more than he took," fostering "understanding, friendship and trade relation[s] between China's Ming Dynasty and foreign countries in southeast Asia, west Asia and east Africa."<sup>37</sup> The *People's Daily* agrees that Zheng's expeditions gave "full expression to the Chinese spirit of 'harmony'," as expressed in Confucian teachings, whereas Columbus and his successors "opened up a large group of colonies" in the Americas, bent on "a typical predatory rise."<sup>38</sup>

The message to countries wary of Beijing's ambitions: despite China's mounting political, economic, and military power, it can be counted on to refrain from territorial conquest or Western-style military dominion.<sup>39</sup> China's strategic culture will restrain its ambitions on the high seas, just as it did in the days of the treasure fleet. Banding together to balance a resurgent China is unnecessary. As the ruling State Council proclaims in a White Paper titled "China's Peaceful Development Road":

It is an inevitable choice based on China's historical and cultural tradition that China persists unswervingly in taking the road of peaceful development.... The spirit of the Chinese people has always featured their longing for peace and pursuit of harmony. Six hundred years ago, Zheng He ... [reached] more than 30 countries and regions in Asia and Africa.... What he took to the places he

<sup>37</sup>"Kenyan Girl Offered Chance to Go to College in China," Xinhua, March 20, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200503201477*.

<sup>38</sup>"Enlightenment Drawn from Global Worship of Confucius," *Renmin ribao*, September 29, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200509291477*. Beijing's network of Confucian Institutes aims to popularize the teachings of Confucius and, in the process, further buttress China's soft power vis-à-vis its Asian neighbors. For more on China's use of soft power, see James R. Holmes, "Soft Power' at Sea: Zheng He and China's Maritime Diplomacy," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 28 (2006), <http://www.uky.edu/Centers/Asia/SECAAS/Seras/2006/2006TOC.html>.

<sup>39</sup>In Zheng He's day, notes one Chinese commentator in a riposte to the Pentagon's 2005 report on Chinese military power, the Ming Dynasty "did not make use of its formidable national strength to extend its boundaries and territory; conversely, it extended and strengthened the Great Wall for its own defense. Furthermore, instead of establishing overseas colonies and plundering other countries, China's mighty fleet treated other nations kindly and generously but demanded little in return...." See Li Xuejiang, "U.S. Report 'The Military Power of the People's Republic of China' Harbors Sinister Motives," *Renmin ribao*, July 27, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200507271477*.



visited were tea, chinaware, silk and technology, but did not occupy an inch of any other's land. What he brought to the outside world was peace and civilization.... Based on the present reality, China's development has not only benefited the 1.3 billion Chinese people, but also brought large markets and development opportunities for countries throughout the world. China's development also helps to enhance the force for peace in the world.<sup>40</sup>

Second, China's leadership uses the treasure expeditions to burnish China's credentials as a seafaring nation, skilled in navigation, shipbuilding, and—though Beijing usually mutes this aspect of maritime affairs, staying on message—naval combat. Zheng He's cruises in effect made China the first country to station a naval squadron in the Indian Ocean.<sup>41</sup> The treasure fleet was a technological wonder by the standards of his day. Chinese ships had been equipped with compasses since the Song Dynasty (宋朝). Navigators knew how to determine latitude and could plot and follow a course to a predetermined destination, using charts accurate enough that many of them remained in use in the eighteenth century. And Zheng's *baochuan* (寶船), or treasure ships—essentially giant seagoing junks, some outfitted with as many as nine masts—featured technical innovations that did not make their way into Western naval architecture until the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> If a treasure ship suffered hull damage from battle or heavy weather, for instance, the watertight bulkheads that subdivided the interior

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<sup>40</sup>State Council Information Office, "White Paper: China's Peaceful Development Road," Xinhua, December 22, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200512221477*. See also Hu Jintao, "Strengthen Mutually Beneficial Cooperation and Promote Common Development" (Speech at the Mexican Senate on September 12, 2005), Xinhua, September 13, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200509131477*. Emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup>Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Sea Power* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 28.

<sup>42</sup>The dimensions of the *baochuan* are a matter of some dispute. Ming histories report that the vessels were 440 feet long and 180 feet wide—a ratio that would make them so broad-beamed as to be "unresponsive even under moderate sea conditions," in the opinion of one modern analyst, Bruce Swanson. Swanson contends that the treasure ships more likely resembled the large junks put to sea in succeeding centuries, estimating their length at 180 feet. He further contends that ships with these dimensions would have been large enough to accommodate ship's companies of the size reported in the histories. Others, notably Louise Levathes, accept the figure from the histories. Either way, the treasure ships dwarfed the ships sailed by Zheng He's near-contemporaries, Columbus and Vasco da Gama (Columbus's *Santa Maria* was all of 85 feet long). See Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, 33-34. See also Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 19.



of the vessel limited the spread of flooding, helping it resist sinking.<sup>43</sup> If battle loomed, the *baochuan* were equipped with incendiary weapons such as the catapult-thrown gunpowder "grenades" the treasure fleet used to overawe and defeat a pirate armada near the Strait of Malacca, then as now a critical artery for seaborne trade and commerce.<sup>44</sup>

And third, Zheng allows Beijing to indulge in one-upsmanship at Western expense. On a recent trip to Europe, for example, Premier Wen reminded audiences that the Chinese explorer had "sailed abroad earlier than Christopher Columbus."<sup>45</sup> Chinese spokesmen routinely contrast the size and technical sophistication of Zheng's vessels with the relatively backward fleets put to sea in fifteenth-century Europe.<sup>46</sup> They also point out that China was a power in maritime Asia first, owing to Ming seamanship. In 2003, for instance, President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) depicted Zheng He's expeditions as a historical basis for the Sino-Australian relationship, telling the Australian parliament, "Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China's Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores," bringing "Chinese culture to this land" and "contributing their proud share to Australia's econ-

<sup>43</sup>Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, 34-36. In contemporary parlance, compartmentation—using watertight bulkheads to subdivide the interior of a ship's hull into many small compartments—restricts flooding to one or a few compartments. Barring major damage to the hull that breaches multiple bulkheads, a compartmented ship stands a good chance of withstanding "progressive flooding" that might sink a ship not so equipped.

<sup>44</sup>Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 47, 50-52. On China's present-day "Malacca dilemma," see Ian Storey, "China's 'Malacca Dilemma'," *China Brief* 6, no. 8 (April 12, 2006): 4-6; and Liu Jiangping and Feng Xianhui, "Going Global: Dialogue Spanning 600 Years," *Liaowang* (Outlook), September 8, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200509081477*.

<sup>45</sup>"Premier Wen's Several Talks During Europe Visit," *Xinhua*, May 16, 2004, in *FBIS-CPP-20040516000069*. Wen sounded similar themes during a spring 2005 trip to South Asia. See Xiao Qiang, "Premier Wen's South Asian Tour Produces Abundant Results," *Renmin ribao*, April 13, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200504131477*. On the extent of Chinese predominance in fifteenth-century Asia, see Roderich Ptak, "China and Portugal at Sea: The Early Ming Trading System and the *Estado da Índia* Compared," in Roderich Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas: Trade, Travel, and Visions of the Others (1400-1750)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 21-37.

<sup>46</sup>Reporting on the efforts of Yao Mingde (姚明德), the official in charge of the activities commemorating the treasure voyages, the official news service *Xinhua* observed that "Zheng He's fleet surpassed all other marine navigators of his time in scale, sophistication, technology and organizational skills in his seven sea trips, which were a great event in the world's navigation history." See "China Launches Activities to Commemorate Sea Navigation Pioneer Zheng He," *Xinhua*, September 29, 2003, in *FBIS-CPP-20030928000052*.



omy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture."<sup>47</sup> Hu's claim that Chinese seafarers settled in Australia during the Ming years is fanciful, but his central message is spot on: China's presence and power in maritime Asia far antedate those of Europeans.<sup>48</sup> Such rhetoric makes an excellent focal point for Chinese nationalism.

Like many national legends—to return to the American example, one thinks of Parson Weems' whimsical account of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree—Beijing's Zheng He narrative rates so-so marks as history. For one thing, the nature of the ruling regime matters, in China as elsewhere. The communist regime in Beijing can scarcely claim to be a direct descendant of the Ming Dynasty (or any other imperial dynasty). Contrary to Chinese diplomacy, therefore, events of antiquity make an unreliable predictor of Chinese behavior today.<sup>49</sup> For another, Zheng's voyages spanned only a brief interval in China's long history. It would be rash to conclude from Zheng's generally peaceful yet short-lived endeavors that China has no penchant for military dominance today. Had the Ming Dynasty not retreated from the seas—dismantling its formidable navy, and ultimately outlawing the construction of seagoing vessels—it might indeed have resorted to arms to uphold the tributary system, more or less in Western style. In fact, the treasure fleet occasionally did use force to support

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<sup>47</sup>Hu Jintao, "Constantly Increasing Common Ground" (Speech to Australian Parliament, October 24, 2003), <http://www.australianpolitics.com/news/2003/10/03-10-24b.shtml>.

<sup>48</sup>Intriguingly, Hu's questionable claims were based on Menzies' *1421*, an account deemed wildly speculative by most academic experts. Menzies claims, for example, that Zheng He reached American shores seventy years before Columbus. See Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (New York: William Morrow, 2003); Hansen, "China in World History," 4-7; and Wang Gungwu, "China's Cautious Pride in an Ancient Mariner," *YaleGlobal Online*, August 4, 2005, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=6095>.

<sup>49</sup>Chinese spokesmen have portrayed Beijing's contemporary policies, in particular peaceful development, as an extension of venerable Chinese traditions. To name one such spokesman, Xiong Guangkai (熊光楷), deputy chief of the PLA's General Staff, maintains that "China's persistently taking the road of peaceful development has historically inherited China's outstanding traditional culture and has also given important expression to the idea of peaceful diplomacy." During Zheng He's voyages, "what the Chinese nation disseminated to the outside world was the friendly heartfelt aspiration of peace, development and cooperation." See Xiong Guangkai, "Unswervingly Take the Road of Peaceful Development and Properly Deal with Diversification of Threats to Security," *Xinhua*, December 28, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200512281477*.



kings loyal to the Dragon Throne. In 1411, for example, Chinese marines intervened in an internal war in Ceylon, quelling an insurrection led by the Buddhist chief Alakeswara and asserting Ming sovereignty over the island.<sup>50</sup> Still another factor clouding Chinese maritime diplomacy: it was precisely the Confucian suspicion of profit-making that prompted the Ming court to pull back from the seas and disband Zheng He's fleet. Seagoing trade and commerce may not coexist as comfortably with Confucian precepts as Chinese diplomacy suggests.

These problems with the narrative of an intrinsically peaceful, benign China determined to supply the region with international public goods should give pause to outsiders examining Beijing's Zheng He diplomacy. In short, China might not be quite as unique a great power as it advertises itself to be.

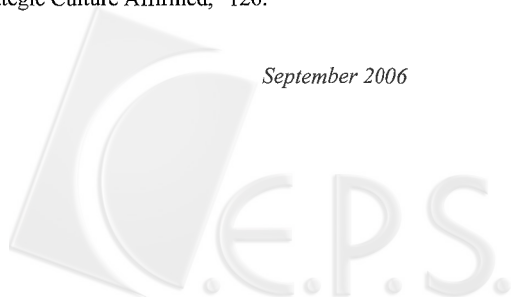
### **Strategic Culture Goes to Sea: Interpreting China's Maritime Diplomacy**

Scholars of strategic culture generally agree that strategic behavior combines realpolitik calculations, as traditional IR theory would have it, with cultural influences rooted in the nation-state's fundamental character.<sup>51</sup> They disagree sharply over how strategic culture works its influence on ideas and behavior. The first generation of theorists, numbering Colin Gray among its leading members, insists that cultural traits pervade the ideas and actions of ruling elites, institutions, and decision-making processes. The second generation, including Charles Kupchan, regards strategic culture as something that elites can manipulate to their advantage,

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<sup>50</sup>Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 114-18; and Frank Viviano, "China's Great Armada," *National Geographic*, July 2005, 41.

<sup>51</sup>As Ken Booth puts it, "to ignore strategic culture" in favor of pure rational choice "is to risk 'black-boxing' another government or nation in an extreme fashion.... Strategic theory without strategic anthropology consigns the study of the threat and use of force to capabilities analysis, the crudities of old-style political realism and the flaws of the rational actor approach." See Booth, "The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed," 126.



more or less at will, in domestic or foreign policy.<sup>52</sup> Strongly implied in second-generation works is that decision-makers somehow stand outside the culture, using it in self-serving fashion—presumably to advance their class interests. Usefully, these clashing perspectives on the motives of ruling elites and their ability to shape culture and identity find a parallel in debates over the nature and policy implications of China's strategic culture. As Johnston points out, nation-states can have multiple strategic cultures, with certain cultural strains dominant and others recessive at any given time. China's long history provides ample sustenance for multiple cultures.<sup>53</sup> China's communist leadership seems intent on accentuating the elements of Chinese culture that advance its sea-based grand strategy.

That Beijing is using Ming maritime history to relax tensions that might arise from its more assertive, better-armed Asia policy seems clear. To manage the nation's peaceful rise, Chinese leaders may well be trying to avoid the self-defeating extremes of which Charles Kupchan writes, steering a middle path between accommodation and confrontation in relations with China's Asian neighbors and with the United States, Asia's leading maritime power. However, how can China-watchers size up the motives of China's ruling elite, gaining insight into the future of Chinese grand strategy? No hard-and-fast conclusions are likely. Asks Harvard scholar Stephen Peter Rosen, reasonably enough, "Those scholars who employ the concept of strategic culture must tell us how they can gain access to the subjective perspectives of the leaders whom they are studying," pointing to "the obvious fact that direct access to members of the strategic elite is usually not possible." While examining what members of the elite

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<sup>52</sup>It is worth noting that the dividing lines between "generations" of strategic-culture scholars are somewhat arbitrary and can depend on what variables the observer chooses to use to classify an individual scholar.

<sup>53</sup>Iain Johnston has been depicted as the vanguard of a third generation of strategic-culture theorists, but a school of thought has yet to coalesce around him, judging by the dearth of new literature supporting his methodological approach in recent years. By separating ideas from behavior, Johnston implies that China's ruling elites are primed to think one way but that they may act another. For the purposes of this discussion, then, he can be classified as a member of the second generation. Hence my primary focus on the differences between the first and second generations.



have studied, said, and written represents "a valuable approach" in theory, continues Rosen, "what is in people's minds may be related to what they read and what they write, but it may not be. Subtle and careful research is necessary to infer from the written record what people actually thought."<sup>54</sup>

Quite so. In the case of contemporary China, the only reply to Rosen's question is that Sinology, like Kremlinology before it, is by nature an inexact science. It is impossible to forecast with precision the thoughts and actions of another—especially in the case of China's ruling regime, where a small, closed "national strategic community," in Jack Snyder's words, debates and decides the course of the nation's grand strategy.<sup>55</sup> Causal connections between identity and culture, between culture and thought, and between thought and action are and will remain elusive. Still, it is useful and necessary to probe the context surrounding China's maritime-oriented grand strategy, bearing in mind Gray's admonition that "strategic culture provides context, not reliable causality" for real-world action.<sup>56</sup>

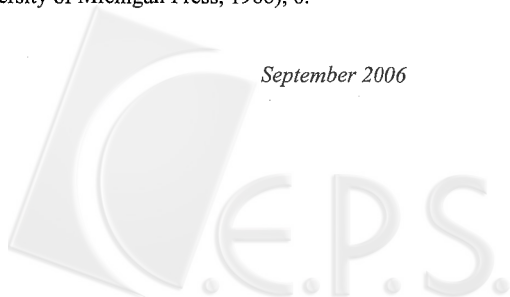
To probe the context for China's Zheng He diplomacy, consider the three possible futures postulated at the beginning of this study. First, steeped in Confucian precepts, China's strategic elite may sincerely believe its own rhetoric: that China is an inherently selfless power and a worthy trustee of maritime security in Asia. Such an identity, propagated through vigorous diplomacy and reinforced by tangible cooperative measures at sea, could give China the soft power it needs to preside over a peaceful order in the region. Hard power, manifest in potent naval forces, would

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<sup>54</sup>Stephen Peter Rosen, "Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 13-14. See also Stephen Peter Rosen, "Strategic Traditions for the Asia-Pacific Region," *Naval War College Review* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2001), <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/Review/2001/Winter/art1-w01.htm>.

<sup>55</sup>Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture*, 8.

<sup>56</sup>Lucian Pye expands, noting that "politics is by its nature an elusive and highly subjective process, particularly with respect to motivations. The political arena is always filled with hidden agendas and actors with conflicting motives.... Political culture is therefore no more elusive or nebulous than is politics." The same can be said of strategic culture. See Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context," 62; and Lucian W. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 6.





take a back seat in Chinese grand strategy. Second, Beijing may be pursuing a grand strategy predicated on realpolitik while using Ming history to soften or even disguise its intentions. Should its bid for a formidable navy falter, moreover, the language associated with Zheng He gives Beijing a fallback position—a face-saving way to resume its traditional, Mao-inspired strategy of passivity at sea or, alternatively, to bide its time until it can overcome any setbacks to its naval aspirations. This scenario would allow China to hedge against uncertainty in the aquatic domain. Or third, China's leadership may be pursuing a grand strategy premised on hard power, yet conceive of its actions as entirely defensive. Clearly, a China predisposed to martial means yet convinced that it is incapable of aggression would constitute a complicating factor in efforts to hammer out a durable maritime order in the region.

*Scenario 1:*

*Zheng He Lives*

Consider the first scenario. If they abide by Confucian doctrines, China's communist leaders may genuinely believe that China has been and is fated always to remain a benign power, with no pretensions to military hegemony and with international public goods to dispense to its Asian neighbors in the form of trade, security, and cultural interchange.<sup>57</sup> Military power will be a tool of last resort in this narrative, and China will embrace cooperative ventures at sea—say, combined counter-piracy or counterterrorist efforts along the approaches to the Strait of Malacca. And indeed, official Chinese news outlets have documented a determined effort on

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<sup>57</sup>For a good discussion of East Asian conceptions of Confucianism, see Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 41-43, 51-53, 55-89. Also useful from a broad theoretical standpoint is Lucian W. Pye and Sidney Verba, eds., *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965). Finally, on the theory of public goods, see Nye, "The American National Interest and Global Public Goods"; and Eyre Crowe, "Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany, January 1, 1907," in *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914*, vol. III: *The Testing of the Entente, 1904-6*, ed. G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1927), esp. 402-3.



Beijing's part to put a Confucian face forward—counteracting the "China threat theory" that Chinese leaders believe governs strategic thinking in Washington and other capitals. To bolster its soft power, Beijing is building over one hundred "Confucian Institutes" throughout the region and the world.<sup>58</sup> In a parallel effort, as described previously, China's leadership has mined China's sparse maritime history, playing up the heroic endeavors of Zheng He. Contemporary China, declares Beijing's diplomacy, will continue in a pacifist vein even as China expands its interests and military means in South and Southeast Asian waterways.

The notion that Confucianism suffuses Chinese political and strategic culture and shapes Chinese actions has a long pedigree. John King Fairbank, to name one eminent proponent of this view, acknowledges that "central power grew out of the sword" in ancient China, particularly during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (春秋戰國時期), when China was fragmented and "victory in war was the ultimate criterion of a ruler's worth." However, he notes that the "final unity achieved by the First Emperor from the state of Qin (秦始皇) promised an eventual surcease from domestic warfare. Unity became the great political ideal," and to lay the intellectual groundwork for national unity, early Han (漢朝) statesmen fashioned an "amalgam of ideas, imperial Confucianism," adapted from the writings of the revered philosopher.<sup>59</sup> Continues Fairbank:

War was disesteemed in this imperial orthodoxy, and the disesteem was given an ethical basis that has colored Chinese thinking ever since.... In this normative structure the military functioned ... as a last resort when disorder had

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<sup>58</sup>Esther Pan, "China's Soft Seduction," Council on Foreign Relations website, May 18, 2006, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/10709/chinas\\_soft\\_seduction.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/10709/chinas_soft_seduction.html). For more on China's soft-power strategy, see He Jingying, "The Charm of China's Soft Power," *People's Daily Online*, March 14, 2006, [http://english.people.com.cn/200603/10/eng20060310\\_249577.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200603/10/eng20060310_249577.html); Purnendra Jain and Gerry Groot, "Beijing's 'Soft Power' Offensive," *Asia Times*, May 17, 2006, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/HE17Ad01.html>; "China and African Countries Boost Soft Power through Cultural Exchanges," *People's Daily Online*, June 19, 2006, [http://english.people.com.cn/200606/19/eng20060619\\_275185.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200606/19/eng20060619_275185.html); and Chang Yun-ping, "China's Shift Poses New Challenges: Academic," *Taipei Times*, July 15, 2006, <http://www.taiwansecurity.org/TT/2006/TT-150706.htm>.

<sup>59</sup>John King Fairbank, "Introduction: Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience," in Kierman and Fairbank, *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, 4-6.



reached such proportions that neither indoctrination in the classical teachings nor suasion by rewards and punishments was efficacious. If the ruler had set the proper moral tone and the institutions of state and society had functioned properly, the violent coercion of large numbers as in warfare should be unnecessary.<sup>60</sup>

Owing to this "pacifist bias of the Chinese tradition," Chinese statesmen over the centuries "consistently put less stress on the glory of fighting," taking a less warlike view of their craft than did their contemporaries in Islam and Christendom. For China, concludes Fairbank, "expansion through *wen* [文], the arts of peace and especially the sagehood of the ruler, was natural and proper," whereas "expansion by *wu* [武], brute force and conquest, was never to be condoned."<sup>61</sup> While Confucian teachings were sometimes honored in the breach, they nonetheless provided the context for Chinese strategic behavior—and, suggests Fairbank, continue to do so in the modern era.<sup>62</sup>

Clearly, this is the kind of message China's contemporary leadership would like to radiate throughout maritime Asia: that Beijing is a trustworthy guarantor of maritime security in Asia, just as it was in the day of Zheng He. Without a China threat, the nation-states in the region have no reason to form a countervailing coalition, let alone to rally behind the longstanding maritime hegemon, the United States. China's history and culture are inescapable rather than usable under this scenario, but they are inescapable in a way that the other Asian maritime powers will find congenial.

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>62</sup>Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross also accept this view of a largely pacifist, defensive-minded China. See Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 24-26. Ross elsewhere advances a pragmatic case for Chinese passivity at sea, arguing that the Chinese navy's weakness will cede regional waters to U.S. dominance indefinitely while China maintains its supremacy ashore in continental Asia—setting up a classic whale/elephant dynamic in the region. Neither Asian titan will be able to apply its power effectively against the other, and peace will prevail. See Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 81-118.



*Scenario 2:**Talking Zheng He's Talk, But Not Walking His Walk*

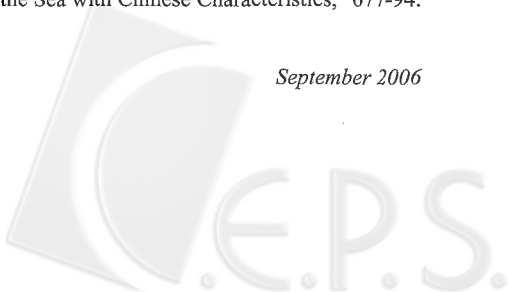
Now consider the second scenario. If this scenario accurately describes reality, Chinese leaders are shrouding a realist grand strategy of sea power in the language of soft power in an effort to disguise their strategic choices, gather public support at home, and present a reassuring visage to other Asian nations. As noted before, Iain Johnston breaks the link between culture, ideas, and behavior for methodological purposes. In so doing, he ascribes self-serving or even cynical motives to strategic decision-makers. Johnston reproaches the first generation of strategic-culture theorists in part for neglecting the "potential instrumentality of strategic culture," namely the possibility that elites will use strategic culture to "clothe strategic choices in culturally acceptable language, and hence to justify the competence of decision makers, deflect criticism, suppress potential dissent, and limit access to the decision process."<sup>63</sup> Given China's traditional central position in the Asian international system, a maritime identity grounded in Ming history—and complemented by China's Confucian outreach ashore—would give Beijing a vocabulary certain to resonate not only with domestic constituents but with audiences elsewhere in the region.

In this scenario, as in the first, Chinese diplomacy would convey a soothing message: that there is little to fear from a China that is venturing onto the high seas for the first time since the Ming Dynasty, and that a Chinese naval presence along vital sea routes is preferable to that of any outside maritime power, such as the United States. Under the rubric of Zheng He, who possessed an unmatched navy yet refrained from military conquest or dominion, today's China can pursue a potent navy of its own.<sup>64</sup> While acquiring the capabilities to fulfill a realist grand strategy—capa-

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<sup>63</sup>See Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 14. To be fair, Johnston is not dogmatic on this point. Paying heed to strategic culture's circular quality, he observes, "Elites, too, are socialized in the strategic culture they produce, and thus over time are constrained by the symbolic or 'textual' myths that they or their predecessors created." *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>64</sup>See Yoshihara and Holmes, "Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics," 677-94.



bilities it might well use—China's elite can defuse worries about its intentions.<sup>65</sup> In this case, then, history provides Beijing with a useful implement as it embarks on its path to sea power.

*Scenario 3:*

*Strategic Doublethink*

Finally, the third scenario represents a kind of synthesis between the first and second scenarios. If this scenario is correct, Chinese strategic elites are amassing the means to carry out a hard-power strategy in the region, yet firmly believe they are acting in tune with China's Confucian tradition of pacifism—even should they choose to use force to settle international disputes.<sup>66</sup> And indeed, this view, like the others, commands some prominent support among China scholars. Andrew Scobell, for one, takes issue with the "conventional thinking" (of which Fairbank is one of the chief purveyors) that regards Confucianism as the principal determinant of China's strategic culture. For him this is only part of the picture. Scobell also portrays Johnston's work on China's "cultural realism," or predisposition to realpolitik, as incomplete. Rather, he says, a "Chinese Cult of Defense" holds sway among strategic elites in Beijing:

Most Chinese strategic thinkers believe that Chinese strategic culture is pacifistic, defensive-minded, and nonexpansionist. However, at least in the contemporary era, these sincerely held beliefs are essentially negated, or rather twisted by its assumptions that any war China fights is just and any military

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<sup>65</sup>Tiejun Zhang accepts the thesis that Confucianism shaped China's traditional strategic culture but contends that China's contemporary strategic culture "is a significant deviation" from its traditional forebear, "and featured mainly on 'defensive realism' that stresses more on the material strength than cultural and ideational preferences." While Zhang is difficult to group with one of the generations of strategic-culture theorists, he fits most nearly with the second generation, suggesting that China's strategic elites speak in Confucian terms while acting according to the dictates of realism—albeit in its defensive form. See Tiejun Zhang, "Chinese Strategic Culture: Traditional and Present Features," *Comparative Strategy* 21, no. 2 (April 2002): 73-90.

<sup>66</sup>Shu Guang Zhang maintains that the Chinese regard "the use—not merely the demonstration—of force as a final resort to international conflict," but also points out that China might use "short-term military action" to prevent an adversary from launching a general war. He attributes this propensity to preemption to Sun Tzu's (孫子) dictum to "subdue the enemy without fighting." See Shu Guang Zhang, "China: Traditional and Revolutionary Heritage," in Booth and Trood, *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region*, 40.



action is defensive, even when it is offensive in nature.... The combined effect of these beliefs is paradoxical: while most of China's leaders, analysts, and researchers believe profoundly that the legacy of Chinese civilization is fundamentally pacifist, they are nonetheless *predisposed to deploy force* when confronting crises.<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly, Liu Huaqing, the father of the modern PLA Navy, puts in frequent appearances in Scobell's work. While Liu propounded an offensive-minded grand strategy inspired by Alfred Thayer Mahan, Scobell quotes him speaking out in favor of such Confucian principles as "peace is precious," "never seek hegemony"—a principle often supported by explicit reference to Zheng He—and "if someone doesn't attack us, we won't attack them."<sup>68</sup> Chinese strategists proffer the Great Wall as proof of China's inherently defensive culture (despite evidence that the Wall was the product of expediency rather than choice).<sup>69</sup> Under China's distinctive version of just-war theory, which reaches back to Confucius,

Just wars are those fought by oppressed groups against oppressors; unjust wars are ones waged by oppressors against the oppressed. In contemporary Chinese thinking, China has long been a weak, oppressed country fighting against powerful imperialist oppressors. Thus for many Chinese, any war fought by their country is by definition a just conflict—even a war in which China strikes first.... Needless to say, virtually any war fought by a hegemonic power such as [the] United States is an unjust war.<sup>70</sup>

For those possessed of this cult of defense, says Scobell, countless matters—national unification or domestic or foreign threats impinging on

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture* (Carlisle, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 2002), 3-4. For a fuller exposition of these views, see Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup> Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture*, 5-9; and Jeffrey B. Goldman, "China's Mahan," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, March 1996, 44-47.

<sup>69</sup> Arthur Waldron points out, however, that wall-building "was only one of the options available to the Chinese, and others, including offensive military action and diplomatic and economic accommodation, were both promising and widely popular at times. In the Ming ... wall-building was nobody's first choice: it was adopted only as other proposals were vetoed." If so, the Great Wall is not quite the definitive proof of China's defensive nature that Chinese spokesmen portray it as. See Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 171-93. For a contrary view, see Nathan and Ross, *Great Wall and the Empty Fortress*.

<sup>70</sup> Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture*, 10-11.



the Chinese leadership's "siege mentality"—could provide Beijing with a *casus belli*. If so, Chinese forces will wage war under the concept of "active defense," which, as Deng Xiaoping and before him Mao Zedong pointed out, employs "defensive offensives" to attain Chinese objectives. Active defense blurs the line between offense and defense and, in Chinese eyes, can even bestow legitimacy on first strikes.<sup>71</sup> Strikingly, the PLA Navy has embraced Admiral Liu's strategy of offshore active defense, which as noted previously is explicitly modeled on active defense. Mao's and Deng's offensive mind-set, in short, has been transposed to China's littoral waters.<sup>72</sup>

This third scenario represents a far cry from the peace-loving message Beijing is attempting to propagate through its Zheng He and Confucian diplomacy. Beijing may be pursuing a forceful, realpolitik-based grand strategy while believing firmly and sincerely in China's beneficent, wholly defensive identity and strategic culture. If so, China's leaders are captive to their nation-state's inescapable history and the habits of mind it instills. If Scobell is right—if Beijing can tolerate this sort of cognitive dissonance—then maritime powers in the region should be on guard.

These scenarios are all plausible. It also bears pointing out that events could prod the thinking of China's leadership toward one of them or another. The exigencies of, say, a war in the Taiwan Strait involving U.S. forces would likely shift Chinese strategic calculations in a realist, zero-sum direction, engaging Beijing's sensitivity to foreign interference and convincing Chinese officials they could no longer afford to entrust the security of the sea lanes—and in turn China's vital interest in economic prosperity—to a hostile U.S. Navy. The framers of China's grand strategy would likely hedge against perceived American animus by accelerating their buildup of hard power, in the form of a PLA Navy with greater long-range striking power. This would give China the wherewithal to execute a realist naval strategy in Asian waters, whatever its Confucian inclinations

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 11-13.

<sup>72</sup>Huang, "The Chinese Navy's Offshore Active Defense Strategy," 9-18; and Zhan, "China Goes to the Blue Waters," 189-203.



might be in the abstract. Zheng He, Confucius, and the soft-power strategy they embody would recede in importance in Chinese strategic calculations, though probably remaining central to Chinese public diplomacy. Keeping abreast of trends in Chinese strategic thought, as well as the impact of intervening events, will give China-watchers in the United States and the region a rough idea of what to expect from Chinese grand strategy.

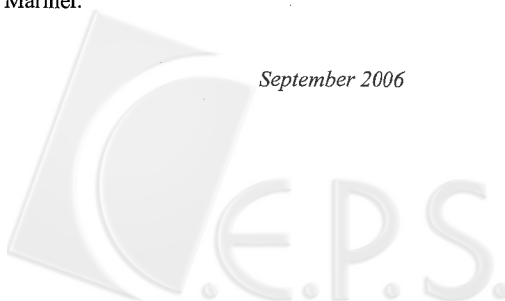
### Measuring China's Maritime Identity

Despite problems with the historical niceties, Beijing has made impressive use of scant historical resources, using tales of feats six centuries past in an effort to remake China's strategic culture in oceanic terms and bolster China's cultural appeal vis-à-vis Asian coastal nations. Will this campaign ultimately work? First, consider the domestic component. While gauging Chinese public opinion is difficult, citizens have reportedly flocked to museums dedicated to Zheng He's legacy. Maritime museums now stand in Zheng's home city of Nanjing (南京), as well as elsewhere in China.<sup>73</sup> One testament to the campaign's effectiveness: many youthful Chinese now clamor for their government to be *more* assertive about the nation's maritime heritage. Some have even beseeched Beijing to endorse Gavin Menzies' dubious claim that the treasure fleet reached North America decades before Columbus' tiny flotilla did.<sup>74</sup> This raises an intriguing prospect: will public opinion come to lead rather than lag behind China's drive for sea power? If Charles Kupchan is right—if strategic culture is plastic, and thus readily amenable to elite modification, yet resistant to quick change—then China's leadership may have applied too strong a stimulus with its effusive praise of Zheng He.

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<sup>73</sup> Author correspondence with Dr. Lyle Goldstein, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, January 2006. On China's efforts to construct a network of Zheng He museums, see, for example, "Experts Hope to Emulate Chinese Columbus," BBC News, October 22, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2349929.stm>.

<sup>74</sup> Wang, "China's Cautious Pride in an Ancient Mariner."





Second, consider the international component. Officials in maritime Asian capitals are among Zheng's most outspoken admirers. Indeed, perhaps the most lavish tribute yet to the centenary of the treasure fleet's voyages took place in the summer of 2005, at a conference held in Singapore.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, countries adjoining the waterways traversed by Zheng He—that is, along the sea lanes that convey the stuff of China's economic development and preoccupy Chinese naval strategists—have organized tributes to his works. While only time will allow outside observers to ascertain the effectiveness of this maritime charm offensive, the early signs suggest that it is indeed quieting worries about the intentions of an increasingly potent, sea-power-minded China.<sup>76</sup>

Unlike American leaders, Asian leaders tend to view China less as a prospective military threat than an engine of their nations' own economic development and, increasingly, as a partner in multilateral forums and regional maritime security efforts. Zheng He, then, cannot fulfill China's diplomatic aspirations in the region alone, but he has proved a surprisingly useful asset to Beijing's maritime diplomacy. Judging from the diplomatic correspondence and news reports that routinely greet Chinese interlocutors, enthusiasm for a robust Chinese strategic culture aimed at sea power has swept both China and maritime Asia.

Supplying a focus for Chinese strategic culture while advancing Chinese maritime strategy—this is no mean accomplishment for a relic of the Ming Dynasty. Zheng He's latter-day "travels" will doubtless continue,

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<sup>75</sup>See, for instance, George Yeo, "Speech by George Yeo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Opening Ceremony of the Third International Conference of Institutes & Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies" (August 18, 2005). HuayiNet website, <http://www.huayinet.org/happening/zhenghe/keynote.htm>.

<sup>76</sup>See, for instance, "Photo Exhibition to Commemorate Zheng He's Voyages Opens in Dhaka," Xinhua, April 3, 2006, in *FBIS-CHN-200604031477*; "Myanmar Contestants Win Third in Worldwide Zheng He-China Knowledge Contest," Xinhua, April 2, 2006, in *FBIS-CHN-200604021477*; Jia Qinglin, "Strengthening Exchanges and Cooperation, Creating a Beautiful Future Together" (Speech at a welcome party held by personalities of various circles in Indonesia), Xinhua, March 27, 2006, in *FBIS-CHN-200603271477*; "Hu Jintao Meets Kenyan President, Calls Kenya 'Key Partner' in East Africa: 'China, Kenya Agree to Further Political, Economic Ties'," Xinhua, August 17, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200508171477*; and "Zheng He Anniversary Harvests Peace, Prosperity," Xinhua, August 6, 2005, in *FBIS-CHN-200508061477*.

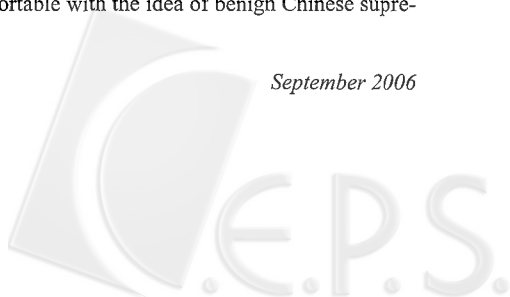


propelled by Chinese diplomacy, officially sanctioned ceremonial occasions, and other mechanisms for cultural outreach. Beijing will persevere with its effort to reshape the nation's strategic culture, and it may well succeed. Yet Ming history can also alert the United States and its Asian partners should China's leadership depart from the benevolent purposes and methods underlying its charm offensive. That is, Washington should use Beijing's Zheng He narrative—in particular its central claims with regard to peaceful maritime commerce and diplomacy—to help determine what kind of sea power China is becoming. Should trouble signs appear, and assuming it wants to maintain its leading position in regional waters, the United States may need to adjust its own policy and strategy. China's ancient mariner, it seems, can render good service—in both capitals.

Which of the three possible futures elaborated at the beginning of this study will most closely approximate reality, and what kind of indicators can outside observers monitor to assess China's evolving maritime identity? In keeping with the precepts of strategic culture, it is worth tracking evidence of both ideas and behavior. Some indices of China's future trajectory to sea power include: (1) written evidence from political leaders, including official policy statements, speeches, diplomatic correspondence, and, to the extent possible, memoirs and personal correspondence; (2) written evidence from strategic thinkers, including articles, books, and public and private correspondence, when available; (3) capabilities analysis, assessing the potential of the force structure the PLA is assembling, the sites of Chinese military bases, and other military assets; (4) evidence of how the Chinese populace is responding to its leadership's effort to stir enthusiasm for marine pursuits; and (5) evidence of how Asian governments and peoples are receiving China's Zheng He diplomacy, as measured not only in words but in cooperative ventures, defensive alliances among themselves or with the United States, and countervailing buildups of military power.<sup>77</sup> If aggregated with the kind of subtlety and care Stephen Peter

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<sup>77</sup>David Kang argues in effect that China's neighbors will tend to bandwagon with Beijing precisely because of the Asian nations' mutual heritage of Confucianism and the regional tradition of hierarchy. They are more comfortable with the idea of benign Chinese supre-



Rosen urges on us, these indices could help us determine whether China is cleaving to the munificent purposes inherent in its Zheng He diplomacy or turning to more forceful means in search of a viable grand strategy.

For now, at least, these indices suggest that the second possible future postulated at the outset of this study—a China whose leaders, influenced by Chinese traditions, dexterously mold the nation's identity and strategic culture to support their view of the national interest—represents the best fit with reality. Both the Fairbank and Scobell schools of thought verge on cultural determinism, while Johnston and Gray allow for liberty of action (within the constraints discussed previously). While Scobell and like-minded thinkers argue convincingly that armed force is not a last resort for Beijing, neither has Beijing used its growing military might to settle, say, disputes over undersea resources in the East or South China seas on its terms. This suggests strongly that China is patient about its aspirations in regional waters and that it has little inclination to use force wantonly—negating its carefully wrought maritime diplomacy. If events bear out this future for Chinese sea power—if indeed China's leaders pursue the national interest prudently within China's unique cultural context—then the other Asian powers should at once welcome the emergence of a seagoing China and remain watchful, lest Beijing veer onto a more ominous course.

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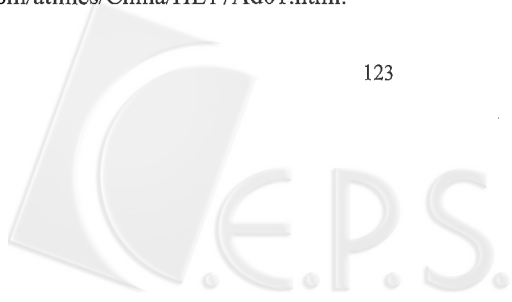
macy than is the United States, which over time could see itself displaced as the region's leading sea power should China resume its station atop an Asian hierarchy. See Kang, "Hierarchy in Asian International Relations," 53-79. Such an interpretation also finds support in Samuel Huntington's depiction of a Confucian civilization in Asia. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).



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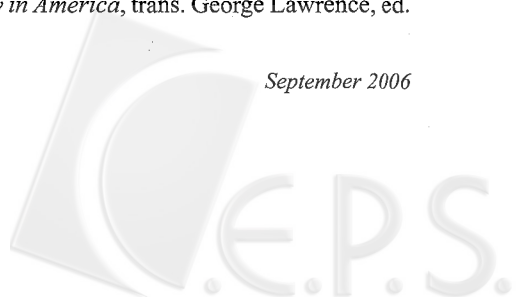
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