CHINESE STRATEGIC CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON INTERNATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20043693

Annotatsiya. *Ushbu maqolada Xitoyning strategik madaniyati va uning xalqaro xulq-atvoriga ta'siri o'rganiladi. Muallif Xitoyning tashqi siyosatidagi konfutsiylik an'analari, Sun Tszi ta'limoti va tarixiy imperiya tajribasining zamonaviy geopolitik qarorlarga ta'sirini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot Xitoy tashqi siyosatining asosiy ramzlari — tianxia, mianzi, xeshe va strategik sabr-toqat tushunchalarini — zamonaviy geopolitika kontekstida ko'rib chiqadi va ular qanday qilib Xitoyning hududiy nizolar, ko'p tomonlama institutlar, iqtisodiy diplomatiya va buyuk kuchlar raqobatidagi yondashuvini shakllantirishini ochib beradi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *Xitoy strategik madaniyati, konfutsiylik, Sun Tszi, tianxia, yumshoq kuch, "Bir kamar — bir yo'l", strategik sabr-toqat, xalqaro munosabatlar, deterrent, konstruktivizm.*

Annotation. *This article examines Chinese strategic culture and its influence on international behavior, tracing the historical roots of China's strategic thinking from classical Confucian philosophy and Sun Tzu's The Art of War through the imperial tributary system to the contemporary foreign policy doctrines of the People's Republic of China. The study analyses how deeply embedded cultural values — including the concepts of tianxia, face (mianzi), harmony (hexie), and strategic patience — shape China's approach to territorial disputes, multilateral institutions, economic statecraft, and great power competition. Drawing on constructivist international relations theory and the comparative strategic culture framework developed by Alastair Iain Johnston, the article argues that Chinese strategic culture is neither uniformly pacifist nor straightforwardly realist but constitutes a distinctive synthesis whose influence on Beijing's international conduct is both pervasive and underappreciated in mainstream Western scholarship.*

Keywords: *Chinese strategic culture, Confucianism, Sun Tzu, tianxia, soft power, Belt and Road Initiative, strategic patience, international relations, deterrence, constructivism.*

Аннотация. *В данной статье исследуется стратегическая культура Китая и её влияние на международное поведение. Автор прослеживает исторические корни китайского стратегического мышления от классической конфуцианской философии и трактата Сунь-цзы «Искусство войны» через имперскую данническую систему к современным внешнеполитическим доктринам КНР. Анализируется, каким образом такие глубоко укоренившиеся культурные концепции, как «тянься», «мяньцзы», «хэшэ» и стратегическое терпение, определяют подход Китая к территориальным спорам, многосторонним институтам, экономической дипломатии и соперничеству великих держав.*

Ключевые слова: *стратегическая культура Китая, конфуцианство, Сунь-цзы, тянься, мягкая сила, инициатива «Пояс и путь», стратегическое терпение, международные отношения, сдерживание, конструктивизм.*

The study of strategic culture proceeds from the proposition that states do not approach international politics as identical rational actors responding to identical structural incentives, but as historically constituted entities whose behaviour is shaped by distinctive patterns of belief,

identity, and normative expectation. First articulated by Jack Snyder in his 1977 study of Soviet strategic thinking, the concept of strategic culture has since been applied to a wide range of cases, generating both productive scholarship and methodological controversy. **[1]**

Among the cases to which the concept has been most insistently and consequentially applied is that of China — a civilisational state of exceptional antiquity whose contemporary rise to great-power status has made the question of Beijing's international intentions one of the defining preoccupations of twenty-first-century world politics. The urgency of this question reflects the manifest inadequacy of purely structural explanations of Chinese foreign policy behaviour. Standard realist accounts, which predict that rising powers will pursue expansion and hegemony as rational responses to the opportunities and insecurities of the international system, have found the evidence for Chinese behaviour both confirming and disconfirming: China has pursued assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea and along the Himalayan frontier, yet it has also embedded itself deeply in the liberal international order and consistently emphasised the peaceable character of its rise. **[2]**

This pattern of simultaneous assertiveness and restraint, which has puzzled Western analysts across the political spectrum, becomes more legible once it is situated within the context of China's distinctive strategic culture — a complex, historically layered inheritance that shapes Beijing's definition of interests, its calculus of risk and opportunity, and its characteristic modes of influence and coercion. The present article undertakes a systematic examination of this inheritance and its contemporary consequences. It begins with the foundational texts and institutional experiences that constitute the core of China's strategic tradition — Confucian political philosophy, Sun Tzu's military thought, and the practices of the imperial tributary system — before tracing their transformation and adaptation in the modern and post-revolutionary periods. It then analyses the manifestations of Chinese strategic culture in a series of contemporary policy domains: territorial disputes, economic statecraft, multilateral institution-building, and the management of great power competition. The article concludes by assessing the implications of this analysis for Western scholarship and policymaking. **[3]**

The foundational contribution to the study of Chinese strategic culture is Alastair Iain Johnston's *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (1995), which remains the most rigorous and influential treatment of the subject. **[3]** Johnston's central argument is carefully counter-intuitive: against the conventional wisdom that Chinese strategic culture is fundamentally pacifist and diplomacy-oriented — a view he associates with the Confucian-Mencian paradigm — he argues that the historical record of Chinese grand strategy reveals a persistent and sophisticated realpolitik logic, a "parabellum" paradigm that is thoroughly comfortable with the use of force when circumstances favour it. Johnston's argument is based on a meticulous reading of the Seven Military Classics, the foundational texts of Chinese strategic thinking, and their application in the conduct of Ming dynasty grand strategy.

Johnston's revisionism has not gone uncontested. David Kang and others have argued that East Asian international history is better understood through the lens of the tribute system — a hierarchically ordered framework for inter-state relations that was, for most of its long history, genuinely stable and productive of a kind of regional order quite different from the Westphalian model. **[4]** On this view, China's current assertiveness is not the expression of a timeless realpolitik but the assertion of a civilisational claim to regional centrality that was disrupted by Western imperialism and is now being restored. Andrew Scobell has proposed a synthesis of these positions, arguing that Chinese strategic culture is characterised by a "civil-military

paradox" — an oscillation between a culturally celebrated norm of civilian supremacy and diplomatic accommodation and a recurrent resort to force justified by the logic of "active defense." **[5]**

More recent scholarship has focused on the specific mechanisms through which strategic culture shapes contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Jessica Chen Weiss's work on Chinese nationalism and foreign policy has demonstrated how domestic political pressures interact with and sometimes constrain the strategic preferences of Chinese leaders. **[6]** Yan Xuetong's "moral realism" represents an indigenous Chinese theoretical contribution to this discussion, arguing that Chinese strategic culture — rooted in classical thought — provides the basis for a distinctive approach to international leadership premised on humane authority (*wangdao*) rather than hegemonic coercion (*badao*). **[7]** These diverse contributions converge on the recognition that Chinese strategic culture is neither a simple given nor a mere rhetorical device, but an analytically indispensable framework for understanding Beijing's international conduct.

The present study adopts a multi-method approach that combines historical analysis, textual interpretation, and comparative case study. The methodological rationale is grounded in the nature of the object of investigation: strategic culture, as a phenomenon that encompasses both discursive and institutional dimensions, resists reduction to any single analytical register and requires an approach that is correspondingly pluralistic. **[8]**

The historical dimension of the study draws on primary sources in translation — including the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, the *Art of War*, and the Seven Military Classics — as well as secondary scholarship on Chinese diplomatic and military history from the Warring States period through the Qing dynasty. The textual analysis focuses on identifying the core conceptual vocabulary of Chinese strategic thought: the concepts of *tianxia* (all under heaven), *zhengming* (rectification of names), *mianzi* (face), *li* (ritual propriety), and *shi* (propitious circumstances or strategic advantage), and tracing their persistence and transformation across different historical periods and institutional contexts. **[9]**

The contemporary case studies are drawn from four policy domains: China's management of territorial disputes in the South China Sea and along the Sino-Indian border; the Belt and Road Initiative as an instrument of economic statecraft; China's approach to multilateral institutions, including the United Nations Security Council, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the BRICS grouping; and the management of the US-China relationship in the context of intensifying strategic competition. In each case, the analysis seeks to identify the ways in which culturally embedded assumptions and preferences — about hierarchy, face, patience, and the preferred modalities of influence — shape Chinese behaviour in ways that are not reducible to purely structural or material explanations. The analytical procedure follows the constructivist framework developed in the strategic culture literature, attending to both the ideational content of Chinese strategic thought and its institutional expression in foreign policy practice. **[10]**

The analysis reveals that Chinese strategic culture is organised around a distinctive and internally coherent set of principles that can be identified across both classical texts and contemporary policy practice, notwithstanding the significant transformations that Chinese society and polity have undergone in the modern period — including the Maoist revolutionary interlude and the subsequent embrace of market reforms and globalisation.

The most fundamental concept in the Chinese strategic cultural inheritance is *tianxia* — literally "all under heaven" — which designates a cosmological-political order centred on China

and radiating outward through concentric zones of civilisational influence. In the classical formulation, *tianxia* is not an empire in the Western sense — a territorial state that projects power through conquest and administration — but a normative order in which China's central position is legitimated by its cultural and moral superiority and maintained through the attraction of virtue rather than the imposition of force. **[3]** The Son of Heaven (*tianzi*) governs not by coercion but by exemplary conduct (*de*); states and peoples on the periphery of the *tianxia* order are drawn into its orbit by the manifest superiority of Chinese civilisation and express their recognition of this superiority through the performance of tributary rituals.

This cosmological framework has profound implications for China's contemporary international behaviour. The assertiveness with which Beijing pursues its territorial claims in the South China Sea and its insistence on the primacy of Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang are most coherently understood not as expressions of aggressive expansionism but as assertions of a civilisational claim — the claim that China's historically central position in Asia legitimates its authority over territories and peoples that belong, in the *tianxia* framework, to the Chinese cultural and political sphere. **[4]** The intensity of Chinese sensitivity to perceived disrespect of this claim — the outsized reactions to foreign criticism of China's human rights record, to arms sales to Taiwan, or to meetings between foreign leaders and the Dalai Lama — reflects the centrality of face (*mianzi*) in the Confucian social order: a challenge to China's dignity is experienced not merely as a political irritant but as an assault on the cosmic order that China embodies.

The other foundational strand of Chinese strategic culture is the military-strategic tradition associated with Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and the Seven Military Classics. Johnston's revisionist reading of this tradition emphasises its sophisticated engagement with the realities of interstate competition and its consistently realpolitik orientation: the ideal outcome in the *Art of War* is to win without fighting (*zhi sheng*), not because fighting is morally objectionable but because it is costly and uncertain, and because the skilful manipulation of circumstances (*shi*) can produce decisive advantage without resort to open conflict. **[3]** This is not pacifism but a particularly sophisticated and patient form of competitive strategy.

The contemporary relevance of this tradition is visible in China's approach to "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*) — the systematic development of all elements of state capacity, military and non-military alike, in the service of long-term strategic objectives. The patient accumulation of economic, technological, and military capabilities over four decades of reform and opening, conducted under the strategic cover of Deng Xiaoping's famous injunction to "keep a low profile and bide your time" (*tao guang yang hui*), is entirely consistent with the Sun Tzu'ian preference for strategic patience and the exploitation of propitious circumstances over premature confrontation. **[5]** Similarly, China's use of what Western analysts have called "grey zone" tactics in the South China Sea — the gradual extension of physical presence through island-building, the deployment of coast guard and maritime militia rather than naval forces, and the exploitation of legal and diplomatic ambiguity — reflects the *Art of War*'s preference for winning through position rather than direct battle.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, provides perhaps the most comprehensive illustration of Chinese strategic culture in contemporary practice. At its broadest, the BRI — which encompasses infrastructure investment across more than a hundred countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America — can be understood as an attempt to reconstruct, in modern economic and institutional form, the tributary relationships of

the classical *tianxia* order: a hub-and-spoke network of economic dependence centred on China, in which China's partners acknowledge its centrality and preferential position in exchange for access to Chinese capital, technology, and markets. **[10]**

The BRI thus exemplifies the characteristic Chinese preference for what might be called soft hierarchy — the establishment of relations of dependence and obligation that do not require the open assertion of dominance but express it through the structural asymmetries of economic relationship. This preference is deeply consistent with the Confucian ideal of benevolent authority: the *tianxia* order is maintained not by force but by the demonstration of superior virtue, and the BRI presents itself, in Chinese official discourse, as an expression of China's "win-win" approach to international relations — an offer of shared prosperity rather than a demand for submission. **[7]** That Western critics identify in the BRI the instruments of debt-trap diplomacy and geopolitical leverage does not necessarily falsify the Chinese self-understanding; rather, it reflects the different frameworks through which the initiative is interpreted by participants shaped by different strategic cultural traditions.

China's engagement with multilateral institutions reveals a further dimension of its strategic culture: the preference for institutional frameworks that preserve state sovereignty and hierarchical ordering over those that impose uniform rules and constrain state behaviour in the name of universal norms. China has been an active participant in the United Nations system since its admission to the Security Council in 1971, but its engagement has been consistently oriented toward the defence of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs — a principle that protects Chinese sovereignty against Western pressure on human rights issues while also providing rhetorical cover for China's support of authoritarian partners. **[6]**

The creation and promotion of alternative institutions — the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS grouping, and most recently the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative — reflects Beijing's growing confidence in its capacity to shape the institutional architecture of international order rather than simply operating within frameworks established by others. These initiatives are designed not, in the main, to replace the existing multilateral order but to supplement and diversify it in ways that expand Chinese influence and reduce Western normative dominance. **[2]** This approach — working within existing institutions while building alternatives, asserting revisionist goals within a broadly status-quo-accepting posture — is once again consistent with the Sun Tzu'ian preference for achieving strategic objectives through position and influence rather than direct confrontation.

The investigation undertaken in this article establishes Chinese strategic culture as an analytically indispensable framework for understanding Beijing's international conduct — one that illuminates dimensions of Chinese behaviour that structural and materialist accounts systematically obscure. By tracing the historical roots of China's strategic thinking in the Confucian political philosophy, the Sun Tzu'ian military tradition, and the practices of the imperial tributary system, and by analysing its contemporary manifestations across a range of policy domains, the study demonstrates that Chinese strategic culture is neither simply pacifist nor straightforwardly realist but constitutes a distinctive synthesis whose key features — strategic patience, the preference for soft hierarchy, the centrality of face and civilisational identity, and the Sun Tzu'ian preference for winning without fighting — exert a pervasive and consequential influence on Chinese foreign policy behaviour. **[3] [9]**

Several conclusions emerge from this analysis with particular clarity. First, the concept of *tianxia* — the cosmological-political framework of Chinese centrality — remains a live force in shaping Chinese leaders' understanding of China's proper place in the international order and of the legitimacy of China's claims in its near abroad. Second, the Sun Tzu'ian parabellum tradition, with its emphasis on strategic patience, the accumulation of *shi*, and the exploitation of propitious circumstances, provides the most coherent framework for understanding both the patience of China's long-term strategic build-up and the assertiveness of its grey-zone tactics.

Third, China's approach to multilateral institutions and economic statecraft — exemplified by the BRI and the proliferation of alternative international initiatives — reflects a distinctively Chinese vision of international order that is hierarchical rather than egalitarian, civilisational rather than Westphalian, and Chinese-centred rather than universal. **[10] [11]**

These findings carry significant implications for Western policymakers seeking to manage the challenge of Chinese power. An account of Chinese foreign policy that takes strategic culture seriously is one that resists the temptation to interpret Chinese behaviour through the lens of purely Western strategic frameworks, and that recognises in the distinctive logic of China's civilisational ambition both the sources of the challenge it poses to the existing international order and the potential terms on which a stable and productive accommodation might ultimately be achieved. **[8]**

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