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THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE:  
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S CULTURE AND  
IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY

by

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## *Preface*

I wanted to research and write a paper that provided a culturally based view of social and political change and the strategic implications those changes might have on international relations and, specifically military policy and planning. It is my hope that this research will give policymakers and planners cause to carefully consider the important underlying cultural factors that inevitably influence the strategic goals and behaviors of nations as they respond to a dynamic contextual environment and interact with each other on the global stage.

I wish to acknowledge and express great thanks to my research advisor, Dr Abigail Gray-Briggs for her assistance in helping me develop this research topic and for her insightful guidance in crafting this paper. I wish to also thank Dr Kathleen Mahoney-Norris and Dr Tim Castle for sharing their expertise in political science and strategic area studies and for providing me with their intellectual counsel as I explored and developed this research topic.

*Abstract*

In today's dynamic and multi-polar strategic environment there is a heightened potential for greater conflict. One reason for this lies in the different ways in which state and non-state actors interpret and respond to the myriad challenges and opportunities of a much more turbulent global context. These differences in interpretation and response are largely rooted in differences in culture for it is culture that forms the sub-conscious set of shared meanings that guide group behaviors, perceptions and actions in the world. Understanding culture in terms of the deep, underlying assumptions and shared mindsets held by both state and non-state actors is critical for today's strategic military planner to predict the potential for conflict and plan for effective conflict resolution.

In this paper, the author used Mary Douglas' group/grid typology model for framing culture to describe the strategic implications of culture and culture's response to a changing global context. The author then applied these concepts to analyze the effect of cultural change in China and its implications for current and future US-China relations. Through this analysis, the author revealed important differences in cultural perspective between China and the US, encouraging different solutions to the common strategic problems of security and prosperity and, thus, potentially causing misperceptions and dangerous miscalculations in policy. Long-term strategic cooperation with China requires US planners and policymakers understand these cultural differences and factor them into every realm of engagement with China.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Leaders of the world's nations today face a common challenge: how to ensure their nation's security and prosperity in a world that has become increasingly dynamic and uncertain. While the problems of national security and prosperity may be similarly shared, the solutions selected to solve these problems may in fact be very different. This is because the way in which people perceive and respond to opportunities and challenges will be influenced in large degree by what Glen Fisher refers to as "culturally-established mental frameworks or mindsets."<sup>1</sup> These mindsets, based on established cultural beliefs, values and biases elicit different means of evaluating events, different decision-making frameworks and different objectives<sup>2</sup> which could all have positive or negative effects on international relations. Fisher asserts that anyone concerned with international affairs today needs to understand the ways in which these mindsets affect them and those they are interacting with,<sup>3</sup> if they intend to build alliances and partnerships to sustain regional and global stability.

This assertion is particularly important for US policymakers and military planners engaged in efforts to "shape the international environment and create conditions favorable to US interests and global security."<sup>4</sup> This key step in the strategic approach to both the United States National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy requires

that the US exert global leadership in partnering with other countries around the world to deal with the challenges and opportunities presented by today's very uncertain security environment. Shaping the international environment implies therefore the need to develop an appreciation of culture and how culturally-based mindsets work to influence the types of solutions that may be selected by actors around the world to respond to the common challenge of security and prosperity. Understanding these concepts as they relate to US National Security Strategy and US National Military Strategy objectives is critical for both policymakers and military planners as a way to predict the potential for conflict as well as plan effective strategies to preclude future conflict.

Unfortunately, an appreciation of the socio-cultural factors that influence the actions of nations are not often included in the planning efforts of US diplomats and military strategists. As Paul M. Belbutowski asserts, "Culture, comprised of all that is vague and intangible, is not generally integrated into strategic planning except at the most superficial levels."<sup>5</sup> A lack of this type of understanding can lead to serious misperceptions and miscalculations in policy which, as Jack S. Levy warns, have historically been factors in the outbreak of war.<sup>6</sup>

This paper helps to rectify this weakness in US strategic planning by first presenting a working definition of culture based on the current thinking of social anthropologists in Chapter Two. In Chapter Two, the author explores Trompenaar's definition of culture as a means for solving problems, Schein's model for describing culture, and a theoretical concept of culture as the way of life a group of people choose to follow. That way of life provides the basis for the shared values, beliefs, biases, and accepted patterns of social relations among a culture's constituent members.

In Chapter Three, the author introduces the group-grid analysis model developed by Mary Douglas as a means of explaining four common organizing principles found in social cultures throughout the world. Using this model, the author explores Douglas' four primary typologies for differentiating culture, examines how and why cultures may transition along the continuum between each typological extreme, and considers the strategic implications for conflict that may occur in cultures experiencing transition.

In Chapter Four, the author applies the definition of culture and the group-grid analysis model to a historical analysis of China's culture. China provides a rich opportunity for cultural study for several reasons. The culture of China is known to be the oldest existing culture in the world. China's culture is greatly unified, allowing a broad-based analysis using the definition of culture and group-grid typology framework described in this paper. Chinese culture remains largely homogeneous, although cultural change has occurred throughout the centuries and important subcultures have gained prominence in recent years, adding intriguing dimensions to the analysis. Moreover, China's renewed economic strength, booming population and increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific Region has made more cooperative relations with the United States a key aspect of the US National Security Strategy. Understanding Chinese culture, its historical underpinnings and pressures for change allows US policymakers and military planners to more clearly comprehend how China responds to the common challenge of security and prosperity in today's uncertain strategic environment. With the insight developed using the cultural lens crafted and applied in Chapters Two—Four, the paper concludes with a culturally-based analysis of current US-China relations, particularly with regard to the

issue of broader democratization in China and the implications for long-term strategic cooperation and the implications for future strategic cooperation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Glen Fisher, *Mindsets: The Role of Culture and Perception in International Relations* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc, 1988), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *National Military Strategy of the United States of America*, 1997, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Paul M. Belbutowski, "The Strategic Implications of Cultures in Conflict," *Parameters* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 34.

<sup>6</sup> Jack S. Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics* 36, no. 1 (Oct 1983): 99.

## Chapter 2

### Defining Culture

Culture is often overlooked in military strategic planning or diplomatic policymaking because by its very nature it is largely hidden from everyday awareness. It is nevertheless omnipresent, sub-consciously guiding the behavior, choices and interactions of its constituent members. This chapter sheds a light on the elusive nature of culture and offers a working definition of culture based on a survey of several of the most current writings and theories regarding socio-cultural phenomena.

Fons Trompenaars' assertion that culture is like gravity, "you do not experience it until you jump six feet in the air,"<sup>1</sup> is a compelling metaphor when one considers that the only time cultural biases are apparent is when one attempts to do something in contradiction to that bias. When it comes to effective international relations and military strategic planning however, it is particularly imprudent to delay one's appreciation of cultural biases among would-be allies and strategic partners until the potentially disastrous occurrence of a cultural *faux pas*.

One approach to a more tangible understanding of culture is to think about it as "the way in which a group of people solves problems."<sup>2</sup> The word culture itself is derived from the same root as the verb "to cultivate," meaning to till the soil. Culture, like cultivating, implies a way in which people act upon nature to solve common problems.<sup>3</sup>

Trompenaars asserts culture, at its essence, “is nothing more than the way in which groups have organized themselves over the years to solve the problems and challenges presented to them”<sup>4</sup> in the most effective way possible.

Central to understanding the elusive yet encompassing nature of culture and its affect on human decisions and behavior is Schein’s model, which depicts culture in three layers.<sup>5</sup> The most basic assumptions about existence, how to cope with the problems of daily life, and how to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems are hidden deep in a group’s subconscious, forming the very core of its culture. These basic assumptions are manifested in more explicit ways in terms of the shared norms a group holds about what is right or wrong, and the shared values of what is good and bad. Norms and values reside at what Schein calls the middle layer of culture. The most explicit manifestations, at the outer layer of culture, are the more obvious factors such as language, dress, artwork, social structures and government systems.

Implicit in Schein’s model is the concept from Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky’s work on cultural theory<sup>6</sup> that states culture encompasses “the total way of life of a people, their interpersonal relations as well as their attitudes.”<sup>7</sup> Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky provide three important concepts that further support one’s understanding of culture, and emphasize the importance of Schein’s middle layer of culture—cultural bias, social relations and ways of life. Cultural bias refers to shared values and beliefs. Using the Schein model described earlier, shared values and beliefs, or the ideals a group holds about what is right and wrong, are usually found at the middle layer of culture. Social relations are patterns of interpersonal relations, and fall into the category of norms also found at the middle layer of culture. Cultural biases and social relations are based on

underlying assumptions about how to solve life's basic problems and made explicit in specific behaviors and structures. A way of life, according to Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, refers to "a viable combination of social relations and cultural bias."<sup>8</sup>

Social relations and cultural biases, indeed norms and values, ideally exist in a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing state. Therefore, just as "cultures become unstable when the norms do not reflect the values of a group,"<sup>9</sup> social relations and cultural biases must support each other in order for a way of life to remain viable.

Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky refer to this phenomena as the "compatibility condition," arguing that "a way of life will remain viable only if it inculcates in its constituent individuals the cultural bias that justifies it."<sup>10</sup> A lack of compatibility between shared values and the social relations they help legitimate is the basis for how ways of life fail to maintain themselves over time and thus leads to cultural change—a subject analyzed in more detail Chapter Three and then applied to China in Chapter Four. Central to understanding cultural change and the implications for potential conflict is an assessment of what happens at the middle layer of culture to cause incompatibility between the established cultural biases and patterns of social relations which make a way of life no longer viable for its membership.

For the purposes of this paper, culture is defined as a way of life based upon a shared set of meanings that a group of people uses when confronted with problems to "interpret their experience and guide their action."<sup>11</sup> This definition is derived from the following operating premises. First, the most basic assumptions about how to cope with life's problems are hidden deep at culture's core, guiding reactions and solutions in a sub-conscious but powerful way. Second, these underlying meanings are manifested in

certain cultural biases (i.e., values) and patterns of social relations. Third, a way of life (i.e., culture) is considered viable by its membership when there is compatibility between what people value and how people interact with one another in the normal pattern of social relations.

What can US policymakers and military planners take away from this definition of culture? Belbutowski writes that today, “more than ever, a sense of vision is required for senior leaders and policymakers to estimate the intangible forces [of culture] at work in the environment within which the United States will have to function into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>12</sup> In today’s very complex and dynamic international environment, different cultures may apply different meanings to the problems presented to them. Those meanings may in turn drive potentially disparate solutions that could lead to misunderstandings among would-be strategic partners, and create the basis for violence and conflict.

Thus, one culture’s strategy for ensuring its own security and stability in a complex and unstable world may be geopolitical isolation and strict internal control via one-party rule. Within this cultural way of life, the strict patterns of social control dictated by the one-party rule system are legitimized by an overarching bias in favor of stability for the collective good. China has, for example, followed this type of strategy for much of the last century. The United States, on the other hand, seeks security by promoting democracy, open market economies and its own values throughout the globe. The way of life for American culture is biased toward more individual autonomy and loose patterns of social relations that afford individual freedom of choice as its solution for stability. Clearly, these strategies are dichotomous and can lead to misperceptions, mistrust and

potential conflict. To be effective in developing cooperative international relations, senior leaders, planners and policymakers responsible for US national security concerns must develop an insight and appreciation for culture and its importance in driving different and sometimes conflicting solutions to common geopolitical problems.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture* (Chicago: Irwin Publishing, 1994), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Schein, "What is Culture," in *Reframing Organizational Culture*, ed. Peter J. Frost et al. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1991), 252

<sup>6</sup> The use of the term "cultural theory" in this paper is based on the argument presented by Richard Ellis and Dennis Coyle in the Introduction to their book, *Politics, Policy and Culture*. Ellis and Coyle assert that cultural theory should "create measures of culture that allow for comparisons across time and space and relate values and beliefs to social relations and institutions. Fundamental to this method is the assumption that it is through the mundane encounters of everyday life that we develop our values and beliefs and learn how our aspirations . . . are interrelated with our preferences about social institutions and organizations." Richard J. Ellis and Dennis J. Coyle, *Politics, Policy and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 1. In the notes for this chapter, the authors state that American anthropologists largely agree with this inclusive concept and refer readers to Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Trompenaars, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 27.

<sup>12</sup> Paul M. Belbutowski, "The Strategic Implications of Cultures in Conflict," *Parameters* 26, no.1 (Spring 1996): 32.

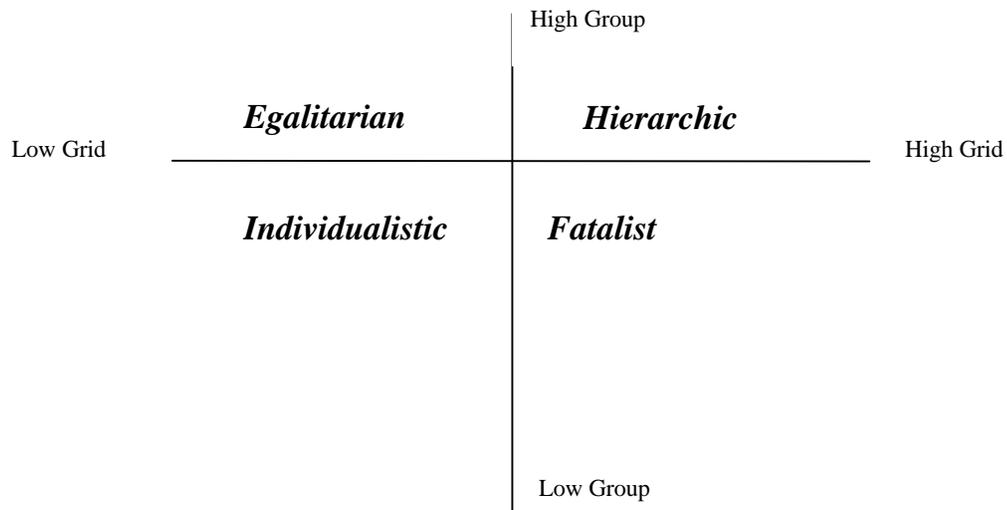
## Chapter 3

### **The Group/Grid Typology: A Model for Differentiating Culture and Understanding Culture Change**

Developing practical insight into the nature of culture requires US policymakers and military planners have not only a working definition of culture, but also an understanding of how to examine cultures using a typological construct, how culture change occurs within the construct, and the strategic implications of those culture changes.

As discussed in the previous chapter, social anthropologists generally agree that in every culture, “a limited number of universally shared human problems need to be solved. One culture can be distinguished from another by the specific solutions it chooses for those problems.”<sup>1</sup> Where the researchers tend to disagree, however, is in how those universally shared problems are conceptualized. In reviewing the literature on the subject, there appear to be two dimensions of common problems all cultures face that cut across the various studies and surveys. These two dimensions are the relationship between the individual and the group (or individualism versus collectivism), and the relationship to authority (or rules versus relationships). One researcher, Mary Douglas, offers a typology based on these two dimensions, which provides a useful way for differentiating cultures. We will use this model as a basis for framing culture in this paper.

Douglas asserts that group and grid are two dimensions of sociality that can adequately capture the variability of an individual's involvement in social life.<sup>2</sup> The group dimension is the extent to which individuals see themselves as members of a group and therefore act in accordance with group norms (collectivism). Within this dimension, the higher the group rating, the more individuals are willing to sacrifice their own interests for the welfare of the group. High-group societies find people linked together in "common residence, shared work, shared resources and recreation."<sup>3</sup> The grid dimension denotes the degree of social regulation and stratification. Douglas describes a high-grid social context as one in which "an explicit set of institutionalized classifications keeps [individuals] apart and regulates their interactions."<sup>4</sup> In this setting, strict rules and lines of authority are established, and definitive roles separate men from women, fathers from sons, rulers from peasants. Cultures with a low-grid rating have less definitive separations as individuals are "increasingly expected to negotiate their own relationships with others."<sup>5</sup> For further explanation, see Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1. Group/Grid Typology**

Taken together, the two dimensions of the group-grid framework define four basic ways of life: Hierarchy, Egalitarianism, Individualism and Fatalism. Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky maintain that these four ways of life each meet the “conditions of viability”—meaning that each is distinguished from another by a certain pattern of social relations which supports and is supported by very specific shared values and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 2, culture was defined as a way of life based on a shared set of meanings for solving life’s problems and manifested in a specific pattern of social relations and shared cultural biases (values and beliefs). Cultures are considered viable ways of life by their membership when the patterns of social relations are compatible with the group’s values and beliefs. In each of the four basic ways of life defined by the group-grid model, there is a set of social relations that is compatible with certain values and beliefs. This pattern and its complementary biases are the basis for differentiating one way of life from another.

Therefore, Hierarchies are characterized by strong group boundaries and binding social prescriptions. Individuals in this social context are bound both by group norms and socially imposed roles. Authority is legitimized on the grounds of accepted social stratification, and the belief that “different roles for different people enable people to live together more harmoniously than alternative arrangements.”<sup>7</sup>

Egalitarian environments are distinguished by strong group boundaries with minimal prescriptions regarding social regulation. Egalitarians place a high degree of value on the equality of each individual member of the group. Because these types of groups lack internal role differentiation and no individuals hold a position of authority from which to exercise control over others, conflict resolution can be very difficult. Decision-making can be a lengthy process as the group strives for consensus among all its members. Without any named authority figure, relations among members can be ambiguous at best.

In Individualistic societies, all boundaries are temporary and subject to change and negotiation. Self-regulation is the governing norm as individuals are neither bound by group norms nor prescribed roles. Individuals in such environments seek power by negotiating profitable relationships with others. Democracies and free market societies are examples of this type of social context.

People who find themselves excluded from group membership and bound by strict regulations or role separations typify the Fatalistic way of life. Like Hierarchists, Fatalists have little individual autonomy. Their decisions about how they spend their time, with whom they associate, what they wear and where they work are strictly controlled. Yet, unlike Hierarchists, Fatalists live in social isolation, “excluded from membership in the group responsible for making the decisions that rule their life.”<sup>8</sup>

One can use the Douglas model to differentiate one group's culture from another. Most importantly, however, the model provides insight into how culture change occurs and the implications of those changes on both domestic and international relations.

Indeed today, more than ever, cultures exist in a dynamic, information-rich global environment, making change inevitable. Culture change occurs when an existing way of life becomes no longer viable and a new way of life emerges to replace it. As mentioned earlier, cultural theory posits that a way of life will endure only if it can continuously instill certain values and beliefs, and inculcate a supporting pattern of social relations to sustain it. When this occurs, a way of life with its accompanying shared values and social relations provides its adherents with "the fabric of meaning,"<sup>9</sup> that is, the necessary and appropriate solutions to solve life's problems. Culture change happens when "people realize that certain old ways of doing things do not work any more."<sup>10</sup>

Cultural change is usually not sudden since values and beliefs hidden at the sub-conscious middle layer of culture are difficult to influence directly. But change can and will occur "when successive events intervene in such a manner as to prevent a way of life from delivering on the expectations it has generated, thereby prompting individuals to seek more promising alternatives."<sup>11</sup> A useful analogy to this process is found in science.<sup>12</sup> Scientific theories lose their adherents when a significant amount of successive anomalies build up against those theories. As real-world evidence mounts, doubts build and defections follow. "A persistent pattern of surprises forces individuals to cast around for alternative ways of life (or theories) that can provide a more satisfying fit with the world as it is."<sup>13</sup>

While gradual, cultural change can occur in several divergent directions, making a change much more difficult to control and producing potentially undesirable effects. Douglas' research shows that given the four ways of life in the group-grid typology, shifts away from one may occur in up to three different and potentially simultaneous directions—along the group dimension, along the grid dimension, and/or diagonally.<sup>14</sup> Thus, replacing a hierarchic social system with a more individualistic one (such as democracy) is not as simple as a direct shift from Hierarchy to Individualism. This type of change often brings with it accompanying or intermediate changes which may produce some unexpected or undesirable side effects.

One possible accompanying or intermediate change in a move from Hierarchy to Individualism is a shift down the grid dimension away from stratified relationships towards more equality in social status. This change represents a shift toward Egalitarianism. Some may want to see their society move in this direction, believing that the authoritative institutions and social stratifications create too much disparate privilege between the haves and have-nots. US policy makers and military strategic planners note that this frustration has fueled the idealist aspirations of many socialist reform movements, including those which helped to drive Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution in China.

Problems with this type of change can lead, however, to increased domestic conflict that has subsequent change effects. For instance, the problems associated with Egalitarian systems (lack of internal role differentiation, arduous conflict resolution and decision-making processes) may frustrate the leaders of large Egalitarian societies who find it difficult to maintain order without strict social regulation and therefore revert to

the higher grid orientations that worked so well in the past. This may have been the case in China when, after the Cultural Revolution, the cadre leadership formed to become the new elite governing body on behalf of the masses. As John King Fairbank argued in 1974, despite Mao's revolution, China did not free itself from its hierarchical Confucianist past.<sup>15</sup>

A second possible change step, which may occur simultaneous to or independent of other changes in a move from Hierarchy to Individualism, is a shift down the group dimension away from collective interests to more individualized ones. This type of change that favors greater individualism with no increase in autonomy is a move toward Fatalism. In this situation, group membership no longer provides a safety net for individuals at the bottom strata. Each individual is left to his or her own devices and resources in order to survive. Some will get by while others will find themselves powerless and socially isolated in a seemingly uncaring world. The inevitable, albeit unintended, consequence of increased Fatalism in any push toward greater individualism presents a strong destabilizing social tension. As self-seeking interests are zealously pursued, expectations are raised to the point that many must be repressed by strict control mechanisms to preclude degeneration into lawlessness and anarchy. Those that find themselves among the newly disenfranchised fatalists in a transitioning culture may wonder if the promise of liberalization is really worth it, and may desire a return to the days when they were not outcasts but members of the larger social sphere. For example, when the regime in modern China began reforming its urban economy in the '80s through increased decentralization and commercialization, "[it] released strong entrepreneurial impulses all over China."<sup>16</sup> Today, however, "between 30-200 million people in China

are in search of employment, encamping in and around temporary cities and creating a potentially volatile pool of poor and discontented citizens.”<sup>17</sup> These obvious destabilizing side-effects “make the vast majority of Chinese (both outside and inside the power structure) worried about the dangers of chaos... and most therefore go along with the current emphasis to preserve stability.”<sup>18</sup>

In the examples discussed above, culture change in both cases wrought serious consequences which caused those in power to reconsider the value of the change and attempt to lessen the destabilizing effects by reverting to old, familiar cultural biases and social patterns. These examples also demonstrate the utility of the group-grid typology as a model to not only describe cultures in terms of their particular biases and social patterns, but more importantly to assess the potential side effects which may occur when culture change is initiated from one typology to another. The potential for cultural destabilization must be carefully considered both by domestic leaders attempting internal change and would-be international partners who may wish to shape and influence change on another culture from an external source.

The remaining chapters will provide a more detailed analysis of China’s culture. Using the group-grid typology, the author will explore the nature of China’s historically predominant way of life (in terms of its established pattern of social relations and cultural biases), the influences which shaped cultural change, the subsequent effects of those changes and the implications for US-China relations, in particular. China remains a mystery to many US policymakers and military planners. Yet through careful analysis of China’s cultural experience, the US may find better understanding that will lead to improved international relations and strategic partnering.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture* (Chicago: Irwin Publishing, 1994), 29. Gert Hofstede supports this assertion in his book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 13. Hofstede cites the work of Ruth Benedict, Margaret Meade, Alex Inkeles and David Levinson as important contributors to this idea.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Douglas, "Cultural Bias," in *In the Active Voice*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 191.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Trompenaars, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas, "Cultural Bias," in *In the Active Voice*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 191.

<sup>15</sup> John King Fairbank, *China Perceived* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 1974), 7.

<sup>16</sup> A. Doak Barnett, "US-China Relations: Time for a New Beginning--Again," *US China Policy--Building a New Consensus* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Sep 94), 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Nature of China's Culture: Past and Present**

Understanding China's culture, its influence on international relations and its importance to US national security and military strategy demands that US policymakers and military planners analyze the historical underpinnings upon which that culture is formed, the reasons for and responses to cultural change in China, and the influence of China's history on its cultural responses to today's pressures and dilemmas. In this chapter, the author applies the group/grid typology construct presented earlier to examples of China's early traditions and Confucianist heritage which demonstrate that for much of its history, China's way of life has been predominantly hierarchical. In examining the problems faced by the ancient Chinese and the solutions sought to resolve those challenges, this author reveals why the hierarchic nature of China's traditional culture remained a powerfully viable and reinforcing way of life for the Chinese people for centuries. The author then uses the group/grid model to analyze the pressures for cultural change in China that began with the expansion of British trade at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the subsequent responses to those pressures. This historical discussion lays the groundwork for an analysis in Chapter 5 of how US policymakers and planners can better understand China today and begin to build effective strategies for long-term cooperation.

One of the remarkable features of Chinese culture is that it is based on the oldest continuing cultural tradition in the world and yet, as John King Fairbank notes, recent archeological studies show that “distinctive features of Chinese life today, such as autocratic government, come down directly from prehistoric times.”<sup>1</sup> These “distinctive features” were the cultural biases and patterns of social relations that developed during China’s early period in the form of a collective, highly structured social system that solved the problem of how best to govern and maintain the security and prosperity of a large, diverse agrarian populous. Four examples of China’s bias toward a high group/high grid way of life that emerged early in its history were the emphasis on kinship relations, the role and legitimization of patriarchal authority, the Confucianist concept of bureaucratic governance, and the system of tribute.

Archeological evidence indicates that as early as the Neolithic age (some 12,000 years ago), when the spread of agricultural communities began in China, villagers organized themselves in clustered kinship units, grouped together to maximize their ability to survive by reaping the most from the limited cultivable land available.<sup>2</sup> Survival under oftentimes harsh and unpredictable conditions required family members and neighbors to work closely together and this strong reliance on each other “accustomed the Chinese people to a collective life in which the group normally dominates the individual.”<sup>3</sup> The sense of collectivism was further reinforced during the dynastic age (circa 221 B.C.) when a “legal system of mutual responsibility”<sup>4</sup> was enforced. This system held all family members and their neighbors accountable for one another, strengthening the collective bias and maintaining order by impelling people to keep an eye on one another.<sup>5</sup>

Not only did the agrarian-based family tradition and village network establish a strong collective bias in Chinese culture, it was also the basis for China's autocratic social structure (i.e., high-grid bias). As Fairbank notes, the family was the social unit led by the patriarch.<sup>6</sup> Within the traditional family group, age dominated over youth and men dominated over women. Stability in the family group was maintained by the high value placed on respect for one's place and the harmony of working within the established social order.

As contact between the early farming villages grew kinship networks and alliances created an opportunity for broader government along a central family line. Eventually, the communities evolved into dynasties, ruled by a patriarchal emperor. The problem of how to ensure the legitimate authority of the ruling family was solved through the concept of Heaven's mandate.<sup>7</sup> According to this central cultural belief, the patriarch of the state, while seen at the top of the human order of society, held a middle position in the hierarchy of heaven and earth and maintained legitimate authority over this Middle Kingdom through heaven's conferred mandate to rule.

These early traditions of collectivism and strict patterns of social relations necessary to support the hierarchical system in China were reinforced with the rise of Confucianism, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., as the central ideology of the Chinese way of life. For example, Confucianism postulated that "a true civilization was to be achieved under the leadership of an elite educated in its ideals and dedicated to the service of those under them."<sup>8</sup> This belief allowed the formation of a well-organized bureaucracy to manage a growing population (swarming to over 53 million by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC). Membership in the elite group at the top of the bureaucracy was available to only the wealthy and

literate, thus restricting officialdom to those at the top of the social strata. Although Confucianist belief in China changed over the centuries, the bureaucracy persisted as a powerful means of reinforcing the high-grid/high-group central autocracy, and created a formidable governmental hierarchy highly effective in managing a huge mass of people.

Confucianism also helped to establish China's original system of foreign policy—a system based on an institution of tribute. The tributary system was based on China's belief that its culture was not only the most viable way of life for its people, but also the most superior way of life over other forms of civilization.<sup>9</sup> According to Borthwick, China's ancient leaders believed “the rest of the world was culturally inferior, inhabited by barbarians whose natural inclination would be to seek favorable relations with [their country].”<sup>10</sup> Thus, any foreigners wishing access to China were required to bring tribute to the emperor by “kowtow-ing” before him and acknowledging him as the center of all civilization.<sup>11</sup> This system provided a setting for foreign trade. More importantly, it preserved the prestige of the empire and reinforced an ethnocentric view that the Chinese way of life was the only true civilization of mankind, the *Chung Kuo*, or “Middle Kingdom” between heaven and earth.

As this analytical review of China's early history demonstrates, China's historical culture, in terms of the group/grid typology, was strongly hierarchical. This way of life remained viable for centuries by the compatibility of biases and social patterns that manifested themselves in various early traditions such as the importance of familial bonds and the role and legitimization of patriarchal authority in the hierarchy of heaven and earth. Confucianist orthodoxy further reinforced the culture through its emphasis on

bureaucratic governance and a system of tribute that strengthened China's view of the viability and preeminence of its way of life over other forms of civilization.

The Chinese belief in the viability and superiority of its ancient hierarchical culture was strongly challenged with the arrival of British trade ships at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>12</sup> A “clash of civilizations”<sup>13</sup> occurred when the British, accustomed to trade between nations on the basis of equality found the Chinese tributary system intolerable. China, faced with the destabilizing effects of an exploding population and the demoralization that emerged from a growing demand for British-supplied opium, “...tried to coerce the British within the framework of the outworn tribute system.”<sup>14</sup> The result was the Opium War through which “the British thought themselves the righteous champions of modern (Western) civilization over Chinese backwardness.”<sup>15</sup> According to Fairbank, British pressure trade and the war that followed set a dangerous precedent for Western relations with China, “for the British were demanding that China join the international order according to Western rules.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, for the first time in 3000 years, China's culture had been severely challenged by external pressure and, as Douglas' group/grid theory indicates, confronted with the question of its own viability and need to change.

For the next century, Western expansion to China caused many Chinese to question the compatibility of its old solutions with the new problems of security and prosperity in a changing world. “In every sphere of social activity, the old order was challenged, attacked, undermined, or overwhelmed by a complex series of processes—political, economic, social, ideological, cultural—all set in motion by the penetration of an alien and more powerful society.”<sup>17</sup> Western missionaries preaching egalitarianism,

individualism and democracy presented new ideas which began to undermine the high-group/high-grid orientation of the existing Confucianist way of life, and created a rising undercurrent of social unrest against the imperialist regime.<sup>18</sup> By 1900, the imperial institution came under full attack by Chinese revolutionaries who denounced the monarchy as the source of China's weakness and incapacity to deal with modern challenges.

It is important to note that Western expansion to China was merely the trigger event that caused the Chinese people to question the viability of their culture. As pointed out in the last chapter, culture change occurs when "people realize that certain old ways of doing things do not work any more."<sup>19</sup> Thus, culture change may be influenced by an external source but the constituent members of the culture carry it out. According to Fairbank, "The Chinese in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were undone by the very factors that had given them such early success in the art of government."<sup>20</sup> The strict pattern of social relations maintained via a system of central authority and orthodoxy, and the collectivist bias that emphasized responsibility to and superiority of the empire allowed the ancient Chinese to solve one problem of stability after another. "When the West broke in and presented new problems, the old solutions were produced and tried again, but they would not work."<sup>21</sup> Loyalty demanded by the ancient Chinese way of life was not to the leadership or the nation-state (indeed, the dynasties and their ruling leaders were prone to change under the theory of heaven's mandate).<sup>22</sup> Instead loyalty was "to the ancient culture and institutions. When China's ancient culture proved inadequate to deal with modern challenges, [it lost its viability] and the Chinese were left without a focus."<sup>23</sup>

By the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the viability of its hierarchical way of life questioned, China struggled for a cultural solution set to meet its new challenges of security and prosperity in a violent and uncertain strategic environment. As indicated by Douglas' research on the nature of culture change, China's culture was now being pulled in at least three divergent directions along the dimensions of the group/grip typological construct. Western influences favoring greater individualism, emancipation of women and technological progress continued to pull the Chinese way of life away from its high grid/high group orientation. Meanwhile, a new nationalism arose as patriotic Chinese youth sought to revive the power of central authority and maintain the hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, "with no monarchic system to guide them, the swollen numbers of peasantry were living precariously" in a fatalistic state, and growing more and more concerned.<sup>25</sup> These pressures continued to bring into question the ancient way of life while new ways of life, based on different cultural biases and social patterns, struggled to emerge.

Eventually, two competing organized movements for revolution arose, and while both offered the promise of an alternative way of life to better meet the demands for security and prosperity in the current environment, neither could break through the deep underlying assumptions inherent in the traditional hierarchic culture. Sun Yat-sen and his Kuomintang Nationalist movement offered the promise of "Nationalism, People's Rights or Democracy, and People's Livelihood," and implied a move toward greater individualism.<sup>26</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) meanwhile pursued a Marxist-Leninist inspired drive toward socialism, or increased egalitarianism.

The thrust toward greater democracy under the Nationalist movement failed when the Kuomintang "developed no higher aim than the preservation of [its own] power"<sup>27</sup>

and lost the opportunity to be a powerful force of social change. Nationalist leaders set up a centralized bureaucratic regime much like that of the ancient dynasties, managed by an official elite “who feathered their private nests in the domination of industry and finance.”<sup>28</sup> As Fairbank observes, “the Kuomintang had little desire for change once they were in power and instead stoked the existing class system to keep them in power and, in essence, keep the tradition of [hierarchy] in place.”<sup>29</sup>

The Chinese Communists “offered the down-trodden peasants at the bottom of the hierarchical system [the most] hope of economic betterment,”<sup>30</sup> and a way out of the fatalistic state they had found themselves in since the decline of the aristocracy. Searching for a viable means to support China’s collapsed rural society, Mao Tse-Tung and his revolutionaries idealized an egalitarian brotherhood that would free the people from the traditional hierarchic evils of “the four olds—old ideas, old habits, old customs, old culture....”<sup>31</sup> Yet, despite the egalitarian fervor, the Communist revolution could not free China from its hierarchical Confucianist past. While proclaiming to be laboring for the welfare of the people as a whole, the Communists continued to reinforce the basic Confucianist system of bureaucracy which upheld the need for an elite ruling body educated in the central ideology and dedicated to the service of the masses.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, just as ancient Chinese tradition reinforced the family structure as the basic societal pattern, the Communist Party “built an even tighter political family for politicizing culture, law, economics and private life,”<sup>33</sup> ordered by a strict hierarchical authority that espoused Marxism as its new central orthodoxy. The egalitarian ideal was never achieved as the Communists reorganized China under a totalitarian polity and a command economy, pulling China back toward the age-old high-grid/high-group way of

life. Fairbank states perhaps China realized it would have to “remain some kind of bureaucratic state, essentially inward looking (because of the sheer mass and growing complexity of the body politic), and concerned with social order more than growth.”<sup>34</sup>

Unable to compete politically or economically with the free market world, the overplanned and overcentralized Chinese Communist system could not fulfill its promise of economic betterment.<sup>35</sup> Thus, by the end of the Maoist era, the Chinese way of life again came under attack, faced with divergent internal pressures for cultural change. As Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky observe, “the outcome of the Maoist era was so at odds with the promise, that it enabled rival [hierarchical and individualist] ways of life to attract adherents and gain political power.”<sup>36</sup> Some one hundred and fifty years after the fall of the aristocracy, China was still struggling to reconcile itself to the hierarchical traditions which had given it so much strength in the past, while at the same time hoping to find a viable means to ensure its security and prosperity in the current environment.

When Deng Xiaoping came into power in 1978, his reforms attempted, for the first time, to balance China’s deep-set hierarchic orientation with the promise of more liberalized structures to support national security and prosperity. While a product of the China’s totalitarian regime, Xiaoping realized that the only way to restore China to its rightful and respected position of greatness was through economic strength—a change in favor of more liberal, individualistic way of life, at least from an economic point of view. As a result, he instituted sweeping agricultural reform, urban economic commercialization and a new “open policy” toward foreign trade, which enabled China to “double the size of its economy, raise living standards two to three times and join the world economy for the first time.”<sup>37</sup>

As Douglas' group/grid theory predicts however, cultural change and the subsequent positive results achieved through the Deng reforms prompted dangerous destabilizing tensions. In China's case, turbulent economic cycles, corruption and varied stresses produced by rapid social change were the inevitable outcome of a society transitioning to support greater economic growth. Entrepreneurial impulses unleashed by decentralization and commercialization raised hopes for more local autonomy (i.e., greater individualism), higher living standards and greater pluralism. Meanwhile, rising inflation heightened fears of a shift toward increased fatalism for those less privileged, ambitious or lucky in the game of free market economics. Tensions on each side of the change were directed at the central leadership as a tide of cynicism (fostered by the newly sophisticated urbanites) rose against what was perceived as a corrupt, ineffective officialdom standing on an irrelevant ideology.

The boiling point of all of the social, economic and political tension was reached with the Tiananmen crisis in 1989, the roots of which "can be found in a mixture of the reform's successes and shortcomings."<sup>38</sup> Ron Montaperto offers this explanation: "Deng's open policy gave China the opportunity to compare itself with the non-Chinese world, and the reform policies brought a new stress on incentive and ambition."<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the reforms produced "unsettling effects of inflation and corruption."<sup>40</sup> Between the new fears and opportunities, the current highly authoritarian way of life was called into question. A serious vacuum of values arose, much like the void that created such confusion and chaos with the decline of imperial autocracy over one hundred and fifty years earlier<sup>41</sup> and the outcome was a standoff between the ardent representatives of two divergent ways of life.

While Doak Barnett asserts, “the decision to suppress the demonstrations with military force was a tragic failure of leadership,”<sup>42</sup> in many ways it was a predictable response when one considers the cultural factors described earlier in this paper. First, “China’s leaders have viewed their mandate to govern and the role of the state in terms that are as old as China itself.”<sup>43</sup> To allow any type of rebellion to occur which could threaten domestic stability would bring into question the ruling party’s mandate to govern, and thus, its legitimate authority. Second, the research presented in this paper has indicated that China’s leaders have always been concerned with the potential for chaos given the sheer size of its population. Some form of collectivist, highly structured governance has been the system of choice for centuries in China as a means to control such a huge and diverse mass of people. Third, in putting down the demonstration, the Deng government relied on the age-old Chinese bias that supported suppressing individualism in favor of the collective good. The government knew the population was vulnerable to pressures to conform and acquiesce, and it therefore could and did take firm action.

Nevertheless, the tense frustrations and desires that grew out of the Deng reforms violently shook the most basic foundational beliefs of China’s still hierarchical way of life—perhaps more powerfully than ever before. Once again, the viability of the existing way of life had been brought into question and in the aftermath of Tiananmen, strong undercurrents calling for a new way of life persisted and continue to persist today.

In today’s China, some leaders seem prepared to proceed cautiously with gradual change, and assert that even now, China has moved “from an extreme form of Maoist totalitarianism to a much looser, and in some respects partially liberalized form of

authoritarianism.”<sup>44</sup> However many Chinese, both inside and outside the power structure, still cling to the underlying cultural traditions which give highest priority to the need to preserve stability and prevent social disorder during China’s difficult transition.

While all of this appears promising for those in favor of increased, albeit gradual liberalization in China, the deep roots of collectivism and social stratification that formed very early in China’s history, were sustained for centuries, and survived violent periods of change over the last two hundred years remain a strong influence in the Chinese way of life. The historical analysis provided in this chapter provides US policymakers and military planners with a foundation from which they can begin to assess China’s potential response to today’s strategic challenges and US efforts to shape and influence China’s role in the international environment. More specific recommendations for how the United States should proceed in dealing with China as it explores future cultural change in light of its long-standing traditions is the focus of the next chapter.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>4</sup> John King Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Latourette, 400.

<sup>9</sup> Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 28. This idea is also found in Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century, The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century, The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA*, 8.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Strategic Environment*, Air Command and Staff College text, vol. 4, eds. Gwen Story and Eva Hensley (Maxwell AFB, AL: ACSC, October 1997), 48.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ssu-yu Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China's Response to the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 1

<sup>18</sup> "The violent rebellions of 1850 in which the Chinese peasants mobilized against the Peking dynasty highlighted the threat to the Chinese Confucian way of life." John K. Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 11.

<sup>19</sup> Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture* (Chicago: Irwin Publishing, 1994), 25.

<sup>20</sup> John K. Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 281

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 288.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>29</sup> John K. Fairbank, *China Perceived* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 1974), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>31</sup> John K. Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), viii.

<sup>32</sup> Under the Communist Party's 1950-1953 Land Reform Movement, some 40% of China's cultivated land changed hands as landlords were deposed and property was redistributed to peasantry associations that were consolidated under Party control. By 1956, "over 90% of all rural families had been organized into about 700,000 higher level Agricultural Producer Cooperatives (APCs). Peasants turned over the land and tools to the collective, receiving pay in the form of work points." Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century, The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 404.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald N. Montaperto, "China Prepares for the Future: The Challenges for the United States," *The Future of US-China Relations* (Washington: D. C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 1992), 32.

<sup>34</sup> John K. Fairbank, *China Perceived* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 1974), 58.

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<sup>35</sup> John K. Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), xi.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 88.

<sup>37</sup> A. Doak Barnett, "US-China Relations: Time for a New Beginning—Again," *US China Policy--Building a New Consensus* (Washington D. C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Sep 94), 6.

<sup>38</sup> Montaperto, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> A. Doak Barnett, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Borthwick, 403.

<sup>44</sup> A. Doak Barnett, 38.

## Chapter 5

### **Analyzing US-China Relations through a Cultural Lens**

The US has identified three core objectives in its National Security Strategy that it wishes to pursue in the international environment: enhanced security, American economic prosperity, and the promotion of democracy abroad. China's booming economy, increasing modernization and large population (creating a potentially strong market for US products) makes effective international relations with China important to the achievement of each of these objectives. Therefore, the US is pursuing a strategy of peacetime engagement towards China with the hopes of facilitating "a stable, open, prosperous People's Republic of China (PRC) that assumes its responsibilities for building a more peaceful world . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Developing successful peacetime engagement strategies with China depends on the ability of the US to apply an understanding of culture and how culturally-established mindsets affect diplomatic and military planning efforts. Earlier in this paper, the author showed that these mindsets, based on the established cultural biases and patterns of social relations, influence the way people of different culture view the world and solve the problems presented to them. The historical analysis presented in Chapter 4 revealed the cultural lens through which China views the world, providing US policymakers and military planners with a better sense of the cultural prescriptions that have shaped

China's way of life, its challenges with culture change and its strategies for security and prosperity. In this chapter, the author applies this understanding by analyzing how culture affects current US-China relations, particularly with regard to the issue of broader democratization in China, and the implications for long-term strategic cooperation.

Historians and US political analysts generally agree that US-China relations have been hindered by a lack of consistency and “punctuated by one crisis after another.”<sup>2</sup> Susan Puska asserts that the inconsistent nature of US-China relations, reflected as a “boom-bust paradigm,”<sup>3</sup> is based on a deep “perceptual gap” caused by “philosophical and cultural differences, historical experiences and ideological differences.”<sup>4</sup> As discussed earlier, China's highly collectivist/highly structured way of life, reinforced by centuries of experience, has inculcated certain values and beliefs that the Chinese continue to believe are relevant and viable—despite internal tensions that have challenged that pattern and recently moved China gradually toward more liberalized preferences. The American experience, on the other hand, has instilled in most Americans a much more individualistic worldview biased toward liberalization in all facets of society and government. These fundamentally different perspectives shape fundamentally different solutions to the common problems of security and prosperity in today's uncertain environment and “help explain why [misunderstanding and] miscommunication often arises between China and the US.”<sup>5</sup>

Long-term strategic cooperation with China requires that the US understand how these cultural differences present the potential for misperception and dangerous miscalculations in policy. Moreover, US policymakers and military planners must factor these differences into cooperative plans for every realm of engagement with China. The

question of increased democratization in China is a critical foreign policy issue between the US and China in which cultural differences may dangerously cloud successful strategic cooperation.

China's powerful hierarchic tradition demands that its leaders continue to resist pressures for democratization, giving "highest priority... to the need to preserve political stability and prevent major social and political disorders,"<sup>6</sup> despite profound change in many facets of Chinese society over the last two decades. While many Chinese leaders "seem prepared to proceed cautiously... with gradual change,"<sup>7</sup> broad democratization is extremely "problematic for China's leaders who see it as a direct... threat to [national stability] that could potentially throw the country into the chaos of internal revolution."<sup>8</sup> This apparent incongruity among China's leadership regarding democratization also exists in other influential circles of Chinese society. Metzgar states that "despite the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989, there is not a clear dichotomy today among many Chinese intellectuals between the existing party line and the democracy movement."<sup>9</sup> He cites the writings of one of China's most prominent intellectuals, Li Tse-Hou, noting that Li appears to stride both camps, affirming Mao-ist ideals while persistently supporting the democratic values of equality and freedom.<sup>10</sup> This ambivalence gets at the crux of China's cultural dilemma as it struggles to reconcile its bias towards collectivism and social control with the pressures for greater democratization without causing the country to disintegrate into chaos.

It is also important to note that China's desire to curb democratization and willingness to use coercion in the process (as evidence at Tiananmen Square and via the continued imprisonment and harsh treatment of political dissidents) are consistent with

the underlying beliefs of its hierarchic culture. According to Chai and Wildavsky in their application of the Douglas group/grid model to predict the causes of political violence, hierarchists “see anyone who opposes the hierarchy as a threat to the group and to themselves [and] are likely to resort to coercion to control recalcitrant behavior.”<sup>11</sup>

To US observers, these ambivalent and seemingly irrational domestic policies in China are confusing and, in many ways, diametrically opposed to the American cultural mindset. According to Douglas’ group/grid model, the American way of life is oriented toward a much more Individualistic view of the world. As such, American culture emphasizes “inalienable” and self-evident” rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as universal truths. Many Americans, therefore, have difficulty understanding China’s hierarchic view on human rights, “based more on the collective good than on the rights of the individual.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Hofstede notes that “Individualist societies not only practice individualism, but they also consider it superior to other forms of [culture].”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Americans see the spread of their Individualist values (e.g., democracy and liberty for all) as part of their “Manifest Destiny”<sup>14</sup> and critical to US security and prosperity. As a result, US National Security Strategy has made the promotion of democracy and free market economies around the world one of its stated core objectives.

Given the dangerous cultural gap with regard to democratization, how then should the US proceed in developing effective bilateral relations with China in a way that supports the concerns and goals of both countries? First, Lipset argues the United States must recognize that ‘pressing for immediate democratization is not necessarily the most effective way to democratize, and that... in some cases nondemocratic, authoritarian rule may be advisable during periods of transition during which the social requisites of

democratization can be further realized.’<sup>15</sup> Indeed this seems to be the prevailing attitude among many today in modern China. As Barnett notes, “most who favor political change [in China] hope for an incremental process of political liberalization leading in a democratic direction.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the US must realize that other examples of democratization in East Asia, while very different from the American model, may be much more applicable to China. Barnett suggests, “the Taiwan and South Korean models, where the progression from rapid economic growth to major social change to the start of real democratization took two to three decades, seem most relevant to China.”<sup>17</sup> Another relevant model is Singapore whose founding leader built a stable, orderly and highly prosperous system based on a “benevolent democratized authoritarianism.”<sup>18</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3 of this paper, this notion of an incremental approach to cultural change as a way to avoid the potentially destabilizing and violent consequences of change is consistent with Douglas’ group/grid theory. Ellis and Coyle, remarking on the group/grid concept, state that “rather than expecting dramatic changes when someone passes through no-man’s land from one culture to another, [one] can recognize that the passage may involve only a series of modest incremental shifts in the weighting of preferences.”<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, the US must exercise caution and open-mindedness in its efforts to shape the international environment, recognizing that, to China’s leaders, the spread of Western values “is seen as a threat to China and to things Chinese.”<sup>20</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, the Opium War occurred because the “British [demanded] China join the international order according to Western rules.”<sup>21</sup> This triggered a series of turbulent changes in China that led to the downfall of the ancient Empire and seriously challenged the hierarchical way of life. As a result, the Chinese believe “China has

experienced ‘a century of humiliation’ at the hands of Western powers.”<sup>22</sup> This belief system causes many Chinese leaders to “be hypersensitive to issues of national sovereignty or anything that might appear to be interference in China’s internal affairs.”<sup>23</sup>

Herein lies the great potential for conflict and miscalculations in policy between the US and China regarding democratization. As Alastair Johnston warns, while many scholars have persistently argued that “China’s strategic culture is essentially nonthreatening,” China believes, nevertheless, that “the best way of dealing with security threats is to eliminate them through the use of force.”<sup>24</sup> Military planners and US policymakers must carefully consider the cultural differences between the United States and China regarding certain culturally charged issues such as democratization. It is unclear just how far China will go with democratization, but the process is certain to be approached slowly and cautiously. China’s form of democratization will be molded by its own biases and traditions, and will have the most chance of success when influenced, not from an external source, but from “changes in the perceptions and practices of the Chinese people themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

While the potential for conflict over issues such as democratization exist, most military observers in Asia and the United States believe that “it will take China at least ten years before they can acquire enough military power to threaten US interests.”<sup>26</sup> An effective strategy for peacetime engagement holds the promise of not only deterring future conflict, but securing a long-term strategic partnership between the US and China. This requires that US policymakers and military planners strive to overcome the “boom-bust paradigm” of inconsistent relations with China and establish a coherent and

articulate strategy which addresses cultural differences and their effect on strategic cooperation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington D.C.: The White House, October 1998), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Susan M. Puska, "New Century, Old Thinking: The Dangers of Perceptual Gap in US-China Relations," (US Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, Aug 10, 1998), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Puska, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>6</sup> A. Doak Barnett, "US – China Policy: Building a New Consensus" (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1994) 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Puska, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas A. Metzgar, "The US Quest for Morality in Foreign Policy and the Issue of Chinese Democratization," in *Greater China and US Foreign Policy: The Choice between Confrontation and Mutual Respect*, eds. Thomas A. Metzgar and Ramon H. Myers, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1996), 96.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Sun-Ki Chai and Aaron Wildavsky, "Culture, Rationality and Violence," in *Politics, Policy and Culture*, eds. Richard J. Ellis and Dennis J. Coyle (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 170.

<sup>12</sup> Puska, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 71.

<sup>14</sup> Puska, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Summarization of Seymour Martin Lipset in his 1993 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, quoted in Thomas A. Metzgar, "The US Quest for Morality in Foreign Policy and the Issue of Chinese Democratization," in *Greater China and US Foreign Policy: The Choice between Confrontation and Mutual Respect*, eds. Thomas A. Metzgar and Ramon H. Myers (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1996), 87.

<sup>16</sup> A. Doak Barnett, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Richard J. Ellis and Dennis J. Coyle, eds., *Politics, Policy and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Puska, 9.

<sup>21</sup> John K. Fairbank, *China: The People's Middle Kingdom and the USA* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 10.

## Notes

<sup>22</sup> Kim R. Holmes and James J. Przystup, eds., *Between Diplomacy and Deterrence: Strategies for US Relations with China* (Washington D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1997), 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 214.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "A Precarious Balance: Clinton and China," *Current History*, September 1998, 244.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Halloran, "China: Restoring the Middle Kingdom," *Parameters*, Summer 1998, 68.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

The avoidance of hostilities between any two parties lies in the ability of each to develop and sustain a mutual understanding of and respect for each other's challenges and aspirations. An understanding of cultural theory and its implications for international relations is an important resource for US policymakers and planners to formulate the types of exchanges and dialogues that will lead to constructive partnering and resolution of differences.

In this paper, the author explains the important role that culture plays in affecting both domestic and international relations. Through the use of the group-grid typology model, the author shows how certain ways of life can differ from others, and discusses the tensions inherent in any transition from one way of life to another. The author also applies this model to frame an analysis of China's culture, the transitional challenges which have shaped China's way of life over the last two hundred years, and the impact of culture on US-China relations and prospects for future strategic cooperation.

In today's dynamic strategic environment, with the explosion of global communications, new ideas are being promulgated literally at the speed of light. The rapid-fire exchange of ideas will inevitably drive new expectations, hopes and fears as many cultures grapple with their existing biases and patterns of social relations in light of

the new opportunities presented from other worldviews. China stands at the forefront of this dilemma, attempting to adapt its traditional way of life to the dynamic opportunities present in today's global environment and preserve its security and prosperity.

With a 1.4 billion-person population, an economy that has grown 7-9 percent annually, a nuclear power status and a modernizing military force, China is critically important to US National Security Strategy and US National Military Strategy. Building a strong strategic partnership with China demands that the US exert a constructive influence on China's future development by seeking first to understand the powerful nature of China's ancient cultural traditions and the challenges faced by Chinese leaders as their country transitions. Armed with this understanding, US policymakers and military planners will be more effective in building strong bilateral communications, expanding trade and security links, and assisting in China's full integration as a key leader in the international community.

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