

# Cultural approach to china foreign policy



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The rising economic strength of China over the past decade has aroused concern over the imbalance of global power. Research on Chinese foreign policy has again become of critical importance to the study of international relations and comparative politics.

This article will begin with an overview of pertinent studies, categorizing them into cultural and non-cultural approaches, then it will re-examine the methodological problems associated with studying Chinese foreign policy making. Essentially, this article argues that any research approach can generate methodological mistakes if undertaken without due care and attention. Rather, a multi-approach with emphasis on cultural factors will be a good model for future study. In other words, we have advocated an improved synergy of rational choice, structural, and cultural approaches. In the case study of Chinese foreign policy making between 2010 and 2011, the multi-approach provided a comprehensive picture of the Chinese thinking process behind seemingly irrational or illogical policy choices.

It was the rising sense of frustration, the combination of over-confidence and self-doubt, which made foreign policy choices reflect the national interests at certain times and not at other times. Keywords Chinese Foreign Policy .

Cultural Approach . China Study .

Sino-US Relation . China in 2010 The rising economic strength of China over the past decade has aroused concern over the imbalance of global power. Research on Chinese foreign policy has again come of critical importance to the study of international relations and comparative politics. 1 For an

updated literature review of Chinese foreign policy research in English, Johnston and Ross [1]. For research in Chinese, see Chiu [2].

M. W. Lai (\*) Department of International Affairs, Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, 900 Mintsu 1st Road, Kaohsiung 80793 Taiwan, Republic of China e-mail: M. W. Lai Even with this increased interest, the subject of Chinese foreign policy is still faced with methodological problems, as was the case before the launch of the Open and Reform policy of the late 1970s.

This article will begin with an overview of pertinent studies, categorizing them into cultural and non-cultural approaches, then it will policy making. Essentially, this article argues that that any research approach can generate methodological mistakes if undertaken without due care and attention. As the “ black box” of Chinese politics has been gradually opened up to external observers, a cultural approach which emphasized the Chinese distinguished tradition becomes most capable of capturing a holistic picture of foreign policy making. Thus, the importance of cultural factors in understanding foreign policy aking is irreplaceable, 2 and researchers should add cultural factors into the menu of methodological approaches.

This would help overcome the problem of insufficient information, especially in the case of China. The second part of this article will present a case study of Chinese foreign policy making from 2010-2011, illustrating the advantages of the proposed cultural approach. Defining the Concept of Culture In anthropology, the classic understanding of “ culture” has tended toward a broad definition. Geertz defined culture as, “ a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of nherited conceptions

expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. [5] This definition deems culture as a complex of people's shared symbolic world.

The complex can serve as a source of people's behavior. Spiro defined culture as the driving force behind societal phenomena such as behaviors, institutions or structures [6]. Kroeber and Kluckholm broadly defined culture as " a way of life. [7] Though having the strength of being inclusive, the broadness of these classic definitions of anthropology can sometimes lead to imprecision. Applying the concept of culture to the study of politics requires that the definition be more specific and precise.

To Johnston, political culture is Mewed as political codes, rules, recipes, standard operating procedures and routines that impose a rough order on perceptions of the political environment. " [8] Laitin argues that with regard to politics, culture is " the system of meaning and the resource for instrumental action. [9] Ross has tried to capture the concept of political culture by analyzing the cultures of organization, community, authority and conflict. He argues that political culture, as the connection between people and the community, can be a dynamic concept with changes and variations.

10] Taking one step further, Keesing argues that political culture can be understood as: "... systems of cognition that relate peoples and communities to their ecology or environment in an evolutionary, symbiotic relationship.

As the environment evolves, so does culture, which in turn affects 2 The concept of " soft power" refers to the factors previously emphasized by the

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cultural approach. The application of “ soft power” to Chinese foreign policy study has begun to flourish in recent years. See Kurlantzick [3], Nye [4].

Chinese Foreign Policy Making 2010-2011 the evolution of the environment.

[1 1] The insights above generate three major propositions: 1: Culture is the connection between people and politics.

2: Culture is dynamic and changes. 3: Culture can be both the means and ends of political inclusive attitude toward different political subjects. In the founding work of the cultural approach, “ The Civic Culture”, Almond and Verba identify factors determining government performance: the attitudes citizens express toward the political system, trust in political authorities, belief concerning the efficacy of individual and collective olitical actions, and levels of political involvement. 12] The key words??” attitude, trust, belief, involvement??” show the non-quantifiable, hard-to-measure, if not ambiguous nature of the cultural approach. Later, Inglehart and Putnam continued the tradition of the cross-national cultural survey and broaden the scale and depth of the research method. 3 Critics have noted that in these pioneering works, the cultural approach remained vague, especially in terms of basic subjects and concepts.

Thus, with such imprecision, the cultural approach has difficulty in explaining change, redicting the future and providing clear political advice [15]. To avoid such methodological problems, this article defines the cultural approach as explanation by way of focusing on cultural factors. Cultural factors are different from non-cultural ones in that they are more closely connected to the relationship of people and politics. Perception is in essence more difficult to fully understand. Thus, to come closer to the facts, research <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-approach-to-china-foreign-policy/>

on actual people, relations among them, and their perceptions is needed.

The cultural approach does not exclude quantifiable factors (i.

e. the so-called “ non-ambiguity factors” which some critics have noted). It is only the case that quantifiable factors have to be translated into cultural phenomena in order to capture how they influence politics. For example, the GDP number alone cannot represent the quality of life of the people. It would be a great help to include people’s perception of wealth to fully understand the quality of life issue. Sometimes the GDP number alone can reflect an actual reality, but sometimes it cannot.

The cultural approach tends to believe the latter and is skeptical of the validity of factors that do not reflect people’s perception of politics. The non-cultural approach in political science tends to hold that measurable factors can indeed properly meet the criteria of being considered a “ social science”. For example, this approach believes that to understand the state of a country, the unemployment rate, price index, and budget balances are better indicators, than concepts such as civil society, freedom of the press, and gross national happiness. The non-cultural approach focuses on institutions and political structures such as governmental agencies, international organizations, schools, corporations, and other organizations. It also focuses on national men and their interactions, such as found in government officials, corporate leaders, congressmen, influential figures or scholars.

For the cultural approach, these institutions and key players in society are important.<sup>3</sup> See Euro-Barometer Public Opinion Analysis at <http://ec.europa>.

eu/public\_opinion/index\_en.htm and see [13, 14]. to keep note of, but it is their relationships to people's perception in general which are of most interest and highest concern. It should be noted that this article approaches, rejecting simplistic dichotomies such as precision versus imprecision, ational versus irrational, and causality versus storytelling.

The differentiation of the cultural and non-cultural approaches actually reflects a division of labor in understanding political subjects. This division of labor will be further illustrated in the next section. The Cultural Approach in Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy In general, the study of foreign policy has been faced with three kinds of fundamental problems. First, regarding the level of analysis, foreign policy research has always found itself in the awkward position of being stuck between the second and third image, to use Waltz's erminology. [16]