

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

China as the Rising Hegemon: Need for Global Cultural Adjustment?

By Victor R Savage

Synopsis

The global community's cultural adjustment to China's rise as a global hegemon will be prolonged and vexatious. Given the long western dominance, the Chinese 'cultural way' might be cause of much political tension in East-West relationships.

Commentary

NOTWITHSTANDING US President Donald Trump's unconventional detractions since assuming office, he will not subvert the current narrative of China's global rise and the international dislocation of its impact on geopolitical changes and the contest of United States-China relationships. The subtext which the global community will need to adapt to is not just the political, economic and security dimensions but the cultural perspective which undergirds the psychological concerns in the western mindset.

China had no problem imbibing the capitalist economic system in three decades by nationalising it and thriving on it. But the issue of the western adaptation to Chinese culture and society is more likely to be a prolonged and vexing proposition, best captured by Braudel's concept of the 'longue duree' or the long history.

The East-West Culture Divide

The rise of the geopolitical contestations between China and the US will once again resurrect as one of the three perennial metageographical myths between East and West. This cultural divide between the Orient and Occident is likely to be amplified for various reasons.

Firstly, it might be trite to say the cultural differences between China and the west is wide and will pose major western cultural challenge to the new Asian dragon. The west often misreads China because China's political culture is different from the liberal, individualistic, Weberian-rational western paradigm. China's Confucian ethos and communist system provides a top down system of command which western based democratic polities will find hard to adjust to.

Secondly, depending on how far one wants to go in history, the west has dominated the global political landscape intermittently since the time of Roman Imperialism. Especially for the developing countries, western colonialism over 400 years has conditioned citizens to western administration, law, land tenure systems and education. After all, nearly all the developing countries speak an array of European languages: Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, and Dutch which underscore the transfer of European culture.

Thirdly, for centuries the world has seen global hegemony emanating from the west. The baton has passed from the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch to the British and French and currently the Americans. Indeed the era of *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana* had been a relatively smooth transfer of global power along relatively similar socio-cultural lines with English as the dominant language. This 200 years of British-American global hegemony has culturally conditioned much of the world from Australia to South Africa with little cultural adjustment required in the changeover of power.

China's entry as a superpower is thus a major civilisational break in global geopolitics after a long gestation of western hegemony. It partly underscores Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis which translates as a major western cultural adjustment to a 'non-western' (civilisation) impetus or in Edward Said's orientalism thesis of "us" versus "others". Donald Trump's presidency and Brexit reflect the westerners' fear of 'foreigners' undermining the western ethos and 'corrupting' European civilisation.

China's Geo-cultural Statement

We are ringside participants in the abrupt change from an anglicised western world to an eastern tradition or the Beijing consensus. What makes the Chinese global impact greater is that China has been contained like a jack-in-the-box situation and now that the lid has been opened, the rising dragon has sprung out and vigorously making up for lost time.

Its current leadership is impatient for recognition as a global power. Despite its long civilisational history, the current Chinese power elites behave like products of a nouveau riche culture: proud and self-centred. Chinese cultural influence will permeate in two ways:

Firstly, Chinese language is not an international currency of cultural exchange and hence China's political behaviour will remain areas of circumspection by the global community. We already see the negative feedback to Chinese economic investment and development aid in African countries and Sri Lanka. Rather than the

Chinese language spreading around the world, it seems that English is diffusing rapidly in China.

Ironically, the more Chinese master English, the less the propensity for the global community to learn Chinese. Hence China might remain in the international community as a cultural enigma, politically opaque because its language is not easily diffused and understood.

Secondly, China's 'communist' party system remains an aberration to a global community engaged in a more open, democratic system of relations. Increasingly China expects the world to adjust to its brand of authoritarian politics. Its recent White Paper on "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation" shows a contempt for international law in asserting its own unilateral national priorities.

China pays lip service to equal representation of all nation-states but in reality it believes in a pecking order (read Beijing order) of big, medium and small states. For China, the Middle Kingdom mentality prevails and it wants to resurrect the patron-client relationships it had with small neighbouring cosmic kingdoms and mandala polities.

Western Democracies vs Chinese Authoritarianism

Western systems of democracy and capitalism have become political and economic norms internationally but are now being challenged by both Islamist politics and the rise of China. China's brand of national mercantilist capitalism is jarring to its western *laisse faire* trading counterparts and its global politics is driven by 'core' national interests.

Historically, China has been accustomed to its supreme civilisation status; as the American political scientist Lucian Pye aptly noted "China is a civilisation pretending to be a nation-state". However it makes no pretence about its international standing by reminding small states not to take sides in power politics and to know their place in the global arena. Already Singapore's supposed non-neutral position over the South China Sea is bearing the economic and political brunt of China's authoritarian rule.

The question is whether China will be able to use its cultural soft power in its global hegemonic designs. The west has and will continue to have an advantage in cultural soft power - film, music, art, dance, literature - because the Chinese government suppresses domestic popular culture and individual freedoms. Such policies will in turn undermine the leadership's desire for allowing a thousand flowers of creativity and innovation to bloom in its quest for developed status. The future of east-west relations will require sensitive cultural negotiations.

Victor R Savage PhD is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
