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From Chopsticks to Diplomacy: Understanding China's Culture-centric Influence on Foreign Relations

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SYNOPSIS

China's exceptional obsession with culture presents a puzzle in understanding its culture-centric mindset and its influence on Beijing's diplomacy. Rooted in a deep historical foundation and reinforced by a notable cultural renaissance under Xi Jinping, China's culture-centric perception fosters a sense of distinctiveness and confidence in Chinese society. However, it also poses challenges to China's foreign relations and its integration into the established world order.

COMMENTARY

As US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen concluded her four-day visit to China, marked by a series of high-level economic meetings, media narratives in China and the West showed divergences. While Western media outlets scrutinised the implications of the visit for US-China relations, Chinese media, particularly social media, were fixated on an unusual focal point: Yellen's appreciation for Chinese cuisine, notably her adept use of chopsticks.



US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen meets Chinese Minister of Finance Lan Fo'an, April 2024. Chinese social media users lauded Yellen's adept use of chopsticks during her recent visit to China, highlighting the country's culture-centric focus and the broader trend in China's approach to foreign relations. *Image by Wikimedia Commons.*

This fixation is in sharp contrast to the fact that Chinese officials rarely receive comparable attention from Western media for their proficiency with forks and knives or their grasp of local languages when visiting foreign countries. Furthermore, despite chopsticks being prevalent in dining cultures like those of Japan and South Korea, China demonstrates a unique fervour in media discourse on the subject. This cultural emphasis extends to major diplomatic events, such as the China–Central Asian Summit in 2023, characterised by sumptuous food and grand cultural performances arranged by the Chinese hosts. Additionally, Chinese people often express fond appreciation for foreign leaders who can speak the Chinese language.

While other factors may contribute to this focus, the obsession with culture presents a puzzle in understanding the Chinese mindset and its influence on Beijing's diplomacy. Given Chinese leader Xi Jinping's policy proposals, including a new type of international relations and initiatives for global security, development, and civilisation, one wonders about the role of Chinese culture in these grand schemes. These observations raise the even bigger question as to whether such attention given to cultural nuances, exemplified by the adept use of chopsticks, reflects a broader trend in China's approach to foreign relations.

Historical Foundations

China's culture-centric perspective traces back to its historical self-perception as the Celestial Empire (*Tianchao Shangguo*), where the emperor was revered as the "Son of the Heaven" (*Tianzi*). Over centuries, dynastic China wielded significant cultural influence across Asia, shaping neighbouring states' governance and daily lives. The concept of "barbarian" (*manyi*), denoting inferiority compared to China, underscores a deep-seated Han ethnocentrism.

Despite interactions with Western countries, China has remained steadfast in its traditions, demanding adherence to its rules. An often-cited case was Lord Macartney's failed mission to China in 1793, which highlighted China's insistence on maintaining cultural superiority and its resistance to foreign influence. Despite a century of humiliation and Chinese elites' scepticism about their cultural traditions at times, this sense of cultural pride has managed to survive and, when combined with a historical narrative of dominance, has become deeply ingrained in Chinese society.

Cultural Renaissance in Contemporary China

In the past few decades, with the success of China's reforms, a state-supported campaign has been implemented to revive traditional culture in China. By emphasising cultural distinctiveness, China aims to strengthen national identity and social cohesion, particularly among the younger generation. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has strategically refocused on culture within its political discourse, aligning it with nationalism to enhance the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Xi's visit to Confucius's birthplace in 2013 and the incorporation of "cultural confidence" into the national narrative exemplify this pivot.

Xi's emphasis on cultural revival extends beyond symbolic gestures. The Ministry of Education has issued policy guidelines for the instruction of traditional Chinese culture, reflecting a concerted effort to instil pride in Chinese heritage. Additionally, Xi's call for a stronger capacity to guide domestic public opinion and promote the international influence of Chinese culture underscores the strategic importance of culture in China's foreign policy objectives.

Implications for International Relations

China's culture-centric approach has implications for its international relations, instilling pride and confidence in interactions with other nations. The belief in China's exceptionalism, rooted in its uninterrupted history, emboldens China to search for a unique "Chinese Way" of understanding international relations, challenging Western dominance of the existing global order.

This conviction also leads to the perception that China, as an inherently unique state, possesses both the superiority and capability to assimilate others without being assimilated. Meanwhile, with its entrenched sense of uniqueness, China questions the necessity of conforming to some global norms. This mindset poses challenges to China's full integration into the established world order. In other words, as noted by some scholars, China wants to be treated as it is, not as a newcomer to the Western-dominated world.

This cultural nationalism has had a negative impact on China's foreign relations, as seen in China-South Korea frictions over Seoul's application for World Heritage status for the Dragon Boat Festival and some Chinese netizens' opposition to Japanese cultural presence in China. Some extreme cultural chauvinists also often take the opportunity to oppose Western cultural presence in China, for instance, using discourse and activities aimed at discouraging Chinese people from joining Christmas festivities.

As noted by Henry Kissinger, China has emerged as a non-Western challenger to the existing US-dominated order, not only in the political aspect but also in the cultural dimension. A better understanding of China's culture-centric perception will contribute to the ongoing debate about whether China's rise poses a fundamental challenge to the existing international rule-based order. In contrast to the current world order underpinned by US exceptionalism, which prioritises democracy and human rights, China's culture-centric exceptionalism is deeply rooted in its own history and cultural heritage.

This difference could become a source of persistent political contestation between China and the United States, as well as several other Western countries, when Chinese political elites show keenness to use cultural distinctiveness to justify the existence and promotion of Chinese-style modernisation.

Conclusion

China's culture-centric perception, deeply rooted in history and reinforced under Xi Jinping's leadership, has significant implications for its foreign relations. While it fosters pride and confidence in Chinese society, it also poses challenges to China's foreign relations and its integration into the established world order. Understanding China's culture-centric mindset is crucial for navigating its evolving role in international affairs.

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