Chinese Culturalism: The Underlying Factor

MARK KNAPP

Introduction

With unification in 221 B.C., China has an expansive history spanning over two millennia, longer than any other modern state.\(^1\) Why then, if China has existed and thrived for so long, does the world function more or less on a Western model? What allowed the West to dictate the structure from which the world was to form? Why not China? These questions make up the colossal debate in which scholars are presently engaged: Revisionist model vs. Standard model. The Revisionist model challenges the accepted Eurocentric view on world history supported under the Standard model. Furthermore, even under the revisionist model, the focus generally is towards why Europe pulled ahead, rather than why China did not. Many scholars argue that China and Europe developed comparably in regards to quality of life, economic growth, and other indicators of development up until the Great Divergence around 1800.\(^2\) Most revisionists try to target a specific event or reason that Europe prevailed over China, but I believe the causation cannot be constrained to a single factor. Rather, the reason the Chinese fell short of Europe, in regards to global influence and power, is its long history of extreme culturalism, with a foundation in Confucianism, a term on which I will expound.

Scholar James Townsend uses the term “culturalism” to explain why China remained distinct from the rest of the world. Townsend suggests that two elements contributed to the construction of culturalism in China. The first is the belief that China is the only true civilization and, while other countries may be military threats, in reality they are not considered rivals, because they could never rule China. Second, strict political adherence to Confucian principles must be followed by leaders and their subjects, for these principles are of universal value.\(^3\) Because China considered itself supreme and viewed no other nation-state as its equal or even a threat and enforced a strong adherence to Confucian culture, the xenophobic spirit found in the region is considered “culturalism” rather than “nationalism.” The difference between nationalism and culturalism lay in the roots from which they grew. Nationalism is based on the modern concept of a nation-state, whereas culturalism finds its roots in a common cultural heritage and beliefs.\(^4\) In “Chinese Nationalism,” James Townsend explains that the allegiance to China by Chinese citizens was based on a shared common culture rather than an allegiance to a nation-state. Therefore, because of its emphasis on cultural heritage and lack of allegiance to a nation-state, China had no reason or desire to alter their cultural traditions in order to strengthen the state. Although culturalism allowed China to stay essentially isolated and flourish across the centuries, it also provided the roots for the eventual divergence between China and the West. By looking at China

\(^1\) John Fairbanks, “China’s Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective”, Foreign Affairs Vol. 47, No. 3 (1969): 449.
\(^4\) Ibid., 98.
and the West comparatively from 1500-1800, I hope to understand the effect that culturalism had on issues such as economics and politics, specifically foreign policy and trade, and how those may have led towards the great divergence.

**Historiography**

Scholars studying the revisionist theory often disagree about the development of China in comparison to the West. Although it is difficult to know exactly how the two entities compared, I find confidence in the case presented by revisionists, who argue that China and the West advanced comparably, and at times China led the race, up until 1800. While this is a complex debate and constantly evolving, I have chosen to base my argument on the evidence I find most plausible. I know that, when looking at this revisionist debate, there are a multitude of factors to consider, including sheer luck. However, I believe that by looking at a few main factors and trends, we are able to understand the impact that culturalism had on the economic and political development of China in comparison to Europe, mainly England. By analyzing the economical and political trends of Confucian China, it is possible to understand how these two societies developed so similarly yet also so distinctly from each other. Furthermore, when assessing the effect of culturalism on these trends, it is important to understand that culturalism manifested itself and influenced different factors in different ways. Therefore, some issues were greatly affected by culturalism, while others developed outside of the realm it affected.

My argument is primarily influenced by and structured around the studies of three different scholars. I developed my hypothesis based on the revisionist question, and the following three scholars, along with many others, directed my focus. Kenneth Pomeranz has conducted research and written extensively on the revisionist issue, focusing on what exactly caused, in his words, the Great Divergence. Pomeranz believes that coal and colonies were the primary causes of the Great Divergence, both lending favor to the West. While I do not believe that coal and colonies were the sole reasons behind the Great Divergence, I found his approach to studying the Great Divergence interesting. After further research, I decided that although his conclusions are valid, there was a much larger factor influencing this whole question of finding the source of the Great Divergence. James Townsend’s “Chinese Nationalism” provided the term around which my argument revolves. Townsend contends that the culturalism in China greatly affected the country’s course of action across the centuries. John Fairbanks, a renowned sinologist, further supported this theory, expounding on how this “culturalism” affected Chinese foreign policy throughout its history. My argument therefore has its foundation in the research and hypotheses of Townsend and Fairbanks, among others, and I apply this information in my attempt to understand and reevaluate Pomeranz’s Great Divergence. Although neither the study of culturalism, nor of the Great Divergence is new, by evaluating the two and seeing the relationship between them, I arrived at my hypothesis that culturalism was the most prevalent factor in the formation of Chinese foreign policy and trade that led to the eventual Great Divergence.
Background

As I’ve stated, China has a long imperial history, dating back to its unification in 221 B.C. During this imperial history, there is evidence of “patriotism, sense of racial distinctness and xenophobia, and commitments to imperial institutions and ruling dynasties.”

Confucian doctrine influenced the Emperors of the Han dynasty (202 B.C. - 220 A.D.) and continued to be a crucial part of society for two millennia. The dynasties utilized the Confucian teaching of the “primacy of social order, hierarchical status, and duty of obedience” in order to more effectively rule from the top down. The classical education under Confucian orthodoxy sought to indoctrinate China’s literate elites into a philosophical-religious ethnocentrism that Fairbanks declares to be much deeper than “nationalism.” Townsend would describe this as culturalism. It is clear that Confucian principles had a profound effect on the Chinese institutions and society, resulting in a national-culturalism that is roughly equivalent “to an amalgam of modern Europe’s notion of Christianity.” This adherence to Confucianism strengthened the tendencies of culturalism and had great influence over Chinese actions.

Economic Implications

Although I mention the isolation of China numerous times in this paper, it is important to understand that it is not such a simple matter to address. A complex history of dynasties and their respective opinions on foreign trade and policies make the topic of Chinese isolation particularly difficult to study. Even though the time focus on this paper is 1500-1800, the years before still have a great impact on the overall question of just how isolated China was? There is proof that the Chinese were trading directly with the Arabs, Persians, and Indians during the Song Dynasty (960-1271). This was an economically prosperous time, when the government withdrew some restrictions on international trade. Authors Swaine and Tellis contend that the Song dynasty’s sea trade was a result of being pushed out of North China by nomads and therefore losing land tax revenue. To make up for those losses, the Song dynasty turned to levying taxes on seaborne trade. The Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) also reopened China to foreign trade. During this time, the government provided merchants with ships and capital necessary to conduct trade, but would take 70 percent of profits, leaving the merchants only 30 percent.

However, although China did conduct trade with more distant countries, the trading primarily involved Asian nations that fell under the “imperial tributary system,” a group of Asian countries that frequented trade with China.

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5 Ibid., 98.
6 Fairbanks, “China’s Foreign Policy...”, 457.
7 Ibid., 460.
8 Ibid., 460.
12 Ibid., 255.
For 28 years at the beginning of the 15th Century, China ruled the seas. During this age of exploration, Chinese eunuch admiral Zheng He led 7 expeditions of naval envoys larger and more sophisticated than any ships to come for hundreds of years. During these journeys, the Chinese traveled as far as the east coast of Africa and an unprecedented amount of knowledge of medicine, cultures, and geography flowed into China. China had half of the world in its grip, and the other half easily obtainable if it had so desired. China had the potential to be the great colonizing power of the world, but after the last voyage the emperor forbade all overseas travel, destroyed the massive fleets, and jolted China into a period of relative isolation in comparison to Europe. Although the three decades of global exploration opened up China to the world temporarily, it could not contend with a tendency of isolation rooted in cultural supremacy that so often guided the dynasties of China. The Ming authorities (1368-1644) banned overseas trade soon afterwards, and this autarkic policy continued to be pushed for centuries. The Manchu (Qing) (1644-1911) authorities opened China up considerably more so than the Ming dynasty, but by no means to the extent of Western Europe. Levanthes contends that “at the heart of the matter is China’s view of itself and its position in the world…the opening and closing of doors. The sullen refuge in isolation.” In this context, Chinese isolation can be understood as a political manifestation of China’s “universal kingship”, a term used by Fairbanks to explain China’s extreme culturalism and self-prescribed superiority, a tool to push a sinocentric worldview.

Now aware of the cultural history and its implications on society, we can understand how this culturalism may have hindered China and had a decisive role in the Great Divergence. In The Great Divergence, Kenneth Pomeranz explores the period of 1500-1800, in an attempt to understand what led to the Great Divergence, regarding per capita sustained economic growth between the East and the West. Pomeranz primarily looks at England and the Yangze River Delta region in China. Both of these locations were the most developed and comparable to the East and the West. Pomeranz contends that Europe and China developed similarly during those three centuries in regards to quality of life, economic growth, functioning institutions, established manufacturing, proto-industrial production, and other factors that may have explained disparities between the two. By showing that all of these factors were comparable Pomeranz is able to narrow down the possible reasons for this divergence. Pomeranz proposes that coal and colonies were the force behind Europe’s triumph. While I do not disagree that these two things certainly helped Europe, I believe that there is certainly much more to the story. While the access to coal may indeed have been a very influential factor, Chinese culturalism does not really play a part in that. England simply had luck on their side. Coalmines were more easily accessible and a rainy climate demanded the development of an efficient and effective pump, thus propelling the improvement of steam technology. However, in Pomeranz’s argument about the effect of the colonies, culturalism certainly plays a role.

Before we explore how the colonies affected the East/West balance from 1500-1800, we must first look at why Europe had colonies and China did not. Although Europe certainly had the geographic advantage of being significantly closer to the Americas, we have already seen that if

China had so desired, they possessed the naval technology to have potentially reached the Americas nearly a century before the Europeans. But, as we know, China destroyed that fleet and did not explore the Americas. The decision to destroy the fleet and remain relatively isolated has roots in the culturalism that ruled China. Since the origins of China are so deeply rooted in a sense of cultural supremacy, China found no reason to go explore the world and deal with less cultured peoples. Fairbanks believes that “the striking fact is not that China’s universal kingship originally claimed to be superior, but that this claim could have been thoroughly institutionalized and preserved as the official myth of the states for more than two thousand years.”

So, while Europeans were exploring in the name of religion or their nation, China remained self-sufficient and land-based.

Before exploring the implications that these colonies had on Europe, an overview of Chinese trade during this period is necessary in order to compare the two. There is much debate on just how open or closed China was during the years leading up to the Nanking Treaty in 1842. The Nanking Treaty came at the end of the First Opium War between China and Britain. It resulted in the opening of more ports for trade, beyond Canton, and gave the West an economically privileged position with China. However, it is clear that China did not completely isolate itself from the world market up to this point. Sizable increases in the exports of porcelain, tea, and silk to foreign markets, including Europe, during this time clearly suggest that traders managed to get around the imperial trade restrictions. And, ironically, it was these exports that helped pay for the massive quantities of silver brought from mines in the Americas, thus empowering Europe even further.

Due to the anti-foreign trade laws, the majority of this trade occurred via smugglers. From the 16th Century until the mid 17th Century, smugglers conducted essentially all of China’s overseas trade. Furthermore, these smugglers functioned in a very complex system that seemed quite unenforceable by the Chinese authorities. Although much private trading and smuggling occurred during this period, it is also clear that the anti-trade laws did have some effect. This is evident through the economic boom that occurred in 1684 after the ban on coastal trade was lifted. Furthermore, the Nanking treaty in 1842 still marked a “breakthrough for the history of silk trade.” These two events indicate that China’s anti-trade laws did, to some extent, isolate China from the world economic market.

In his article “Is there an East Asia Development Path? Long-term Comparisons, Constraints, and Continuities,” Pomeranz simplifies the Great Divergence by saying that it was shaped by an “exceptional resource bonanza.” He then explains that while European growth was primarily resource-intensive based, the East Asian growth was based on different social ideas. During this time the world’s population grew very fast and Western Europe was able to combat the

16 Fairbanks, “China’s Foreign Policy...”, 456
18 O’Rourke, “After Colombus...”, 440.
20 Ibid., 270.
21 O’Rourke, “After Colombus...”, 441.
23 Ibid., 322.
looming Malthusian limits through a number of mechanisms. England, in particular, was able to combat this resource restraint through new technology, resources from the New World, favorable global conjectures, and increased coal production.\textsuperscript{24} The New World allowed a surge of imports of the four Malthusian necessities: food, fiber, building materials, and fuel.\textsuperscript{25} The colonies opened up a new set of plentiful resources and allowed Europe to import raw materials cheaply, in order to create and export manufactured goods at a great profit, the two sides working and feeding off of each other, leading to greater growth. The New World became a new periphery for Europe, but since the labor was slave based the profits and resource exploitation was even greater.\textsuperscript{26} China, lacking colonies of endless resources and slave-power, approached economic production a bit differently.

Import substitution occurs when a population decides to forego importing a good and instead manufacture it domestically. Pomeranz considers this a natural economic process that occurs in peripheries when people switch to new types of production and decide what goods to produce themselves.\textsuperscript{27} This can only occur in peripheries that, more or less, have free labor and a lack of economic restrictions.\textsuperscript{28} Therefore, since the labor in the New World was primarily slave-based, Europe did not employ import substitution and continued to use the raw goods from the periphery to manufacture goods in the core. Import substitution can lead to reduced raw material surpluses for export and reduced demand for imported manufacturers. This occurred in much of China in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, when import substitution became common, particularly in the manufacturing of textiles.\textsuperscript{29} Whereas slaves provided a constant stream of raw goods from the periphery to Europe, China’s peasants were considerably freer than their European counterparts, both the slaves in the Americas and the peasants at home, and therefore engaged in import substitution, leading to an internal cyclical trade cycle. By using their own resources, rather than exporting and importing, China stunted its per capita income growth and contributed to the plateau and decline of what had been, by far, the largest long-distance trade regime in the world.\textsuperscript{30}

What caused this move toward import substitution? Although Pomeranz believes that this is a naturally occurring in free peripheries, he acknowledges that the issue is more complex than that. He suggests that population growth and environmental strains may explain why so much of the population switched to manufacturing goods.\textsuperscript{31} However, there is certainly more to the story than that. Women in China often had their “womanliness” measured by embroidery skills, something that culturally had been present since late Imperial China.\textsuperscript{32} In China, especially compared to Europe during this time, cultural objections to women working outside the house were strong, and men were encouraged to have wives who focused on production based out of home. However, although women were encouraged to stay home, there was not a stigma on their

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 325. 
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 331. 
\textsuperscript{26} Pomeranz, The Great Divergence, 267. 
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 243. 
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 245. 
\textsuperscript{29} Pomeranz, “Is There…”, 331. 
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 331. 
\textsuperscript{31} Pomeranz, The Great Divergence, 246. 
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 97.
engagement in market-oriented production. In fact, a Chinese woman could make more money from selling her textiles than an unskilled male laborer. Jack Goldstone offers a theory about how the cultural tendency for women to stay home affected the economy. Goldstone contends that China did not develop the factories that Europe did, because of the “self-exploitation” of women. This made the building of factories less attractive than it would have been if there were not the competition from the homemade goods from the women. He believes the difference in Europe was that women could leave home to work in the factories and elsewhere. Although China was comparable to Europe in factors of available capital and technological inventiveness, Goldstone contends that this cultural norm prevented the building of factories.

Although there is certainly more to explaining the adoption of import substitution and economic divergence than the culture of women in the workplace, it is evident that it certainly had an effect. Also, we must not forget that during the time when China adopted import substitution, the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century (up to Nanking Treaty), China was ruled by the Qing dynasty that had laws in place banning private seaborne trade. Both of these factors played a significant role in creating economic divides between the West and China leading up to the great divergence. These factors are rooted in a strong cultural tradition that the Chinese were unwilling to let go of. By analyzing the economic history, it is extremely evident that this notion of culturalism greatly affected China’s economic development, especially in regards to trade and internal cultural norms about work. To further strengthen my argument about the profound effect of culturalism in China, I will examine the political implications it had.

**Political Implications**

The economic tendencies and trends in China clearly are a result of the broader workings of the government and institutions of China. Beyond the economy, Chinese culturalism played a pivotal role in the establishment of foreign policy and military action. The Confucian values that so often guided the emperor’s decisions were also fundamental in the creation of foreign policy beyond the economic realm.

Throughout the history of China, the protection and preservation of the heartland remained the central focal point in which foreign policy was constructed. Authors Swain and Tellis argue that the two primary tenets of Chinese foreign policy were the securing of the periphery and the consolidation of internal control, both a result of cultural factors. They contend that China was a “highly homogeneous culture and civilization incorporating a common set of political and social beliefs about the organizational and procedural requirements for stability, peace, and prosperity in an often chaos-prone environment.” These beliefs are centered on the notion of China as a “harmony-oriented Confucian-legalist order enforced by a single imperial bureaucracy.” 90% percent of Chinese are descendents of the Han and this highly homogeneous culture, through the humanistic and ethical doctrine of Confucianism, developed a society with a common set of social beliefs. These social beliefs are rooted in Confucian values and the belief in

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34 Ibid., 100.
35 Ibid., 103.
36 Swain and Tellis, Interpreting China’s..., 40.
37 Ibid., 22.
universal kingship. The foreign policies that China implemented in the realm of external security all revolved around the defense of the Chinese “cultural, geographic, and sociopolitical heartland.”

To ensure the security of the heartland, control of the periphery was key. Beyond the strategic importance of the area, it was considered important to assert a “hierarchical, sinocentric, Confucian international order.” Swaine and Tellis believe that, throughout history, the attempts to consolidate the periphery by China served three purposes:

1. Eliminate threats to routes or Chinese frontiers
2. Intimidate or persuade neighboring tribes, kingdoms, or states along the periphery to accept China’s suzerainty and thereby acknowledge China’s sinocentric worldview.
3. To reinforce to the Chinese the authority of the regime and the leader.

All three of these purposes have a foundation in the culturalism rooted in Confucianism that played such a profound effect on the formation of foreign policy. The periphery, however, was not easy to control and China’s history tells endless accounts of wars and skirmishes with the marauding tribes and kingdoms on the edge of the heartland. This need to consolidate the periphery molded much of China’s foreign policy.

It is clear that foreign policy in China changed as time progressed. However, most dynasties sought some sort of control over the periphery. The amount of control depended on the current state of internal affairs and sense of unification among the Chinese. During the beginning stages of a new regime, all effort was focused at eliminating “remaining domestic resistance and reestablishing internal order and control.” It was only after domestic order had been achieved that the regime would attempt to consolidate the periphery to its historical maximum limits through direct control. Although this is not an unusual thing for new governments to do anywhere in the world, the reasoning behind it makes China unique. Other nations may do this for political and economic reasons; China did it to preserve a culture that, in their eyes, was far more important than dealing with the outside world. This highlights how much importance the dynasties placed on having a homogeneous society. Preserving Chinese culture internally had priority over protecting it from the outside. Considering the primary motivation for consolidating the periphery was to protect the Chinese culture, internal order and unity had to be present.

Fairbanks also offers his insight about the major traditions of Chinese foreign policy, giving three major tenets around which policy was based. 1) Strategic primacy of Inner Asia; 2) Disesteem of Sea Power; 3) the doctrine of Chinese superiority, Universal Kingship. Fairbanks’ insight mirrors that of Swaine and Tellis and further supports the argument that control of the periphery and protection of a supreme culture remained the top priority in Chinese foreign policy.

38 Ibid., 22.
39 Ibid., 25.
40 Ibid., 36.
41 Ibid., 33.
42 Ibid., 34.
Since the motivation for having control in the periphery primarily centered around preservation and protection, the Chinese actions primarily were defensive in nature. These military actions against the periphery served to eliminate threats and reestablish regime authority and rarely did these actions go beyond the known periphery. Granted, like with the economy, exceptions did occur, the two biggest being actions taken during the Yuan and Qing dynasties. The defensive nature of these actions can be seen in the fact that the majority of military campaigns occurred during the first third of a regime’s power and rarely extended beyond the periphery. This is evidence that regimes placed high priority at first securing the heartland, through consolidating the periphery, but generally did not go beyond those defensive actions. Records show that the times when the action was more offensive were instances when the Chinese needed to regain lost territories to foreigners. So we now must ask why China, a colossal country that had perhaps the largest standing army in the world, primarily was defensive rather than offensive militarily.

Confucian advisors played a significant role in the shaping of foreign policies of Chinese dynasties. Confucian advisors and bureaucrats often resisted, for selfish and broader ethical reasons, the times in Chinese history when military actions went beyond securing the periphery and heartland. However, when a threat was perceived to the Confucian culture of China, it incited defensive reactions from the advisors. These advisors argued that involvement, diplomatically and economically, with foreign barbarians would “weaken the Confucian-legalist order, demoralize the population, create economic disruption and lawlessness, and thereby threaten domestic tranquility, harmony, and stability.” Essentially, Confucian advisors believed in strong border control and limited diplomatic and economic contact with foreigners, and often shaped their foreign policy after that. Although Confucian strategy was generally defensive, offensive measures were occasionally supported. In Confucianism, one is supposed to bring about change by virtue. The emperor was considered to possess virtue, and so the actions dictated by the emperor were inherently virtuous. Confucian advisors may have played the role of moral and ethical guidance, but they did not want to see their heartland be taken over by barbarians and understood that action, if not excessive or prolonged, had a place in foreign policy.

Conclusion

In his article “The Persistence of Tradition in Chinese Foreign Policy,” Mark Mancall offers five assumptions that the Chinese had about the world order:

1) The traditional world is hierarchical, not egalitarian
2) China’s centrality in the world order was a function of her civilization and virtue, particularly the virtue of China’s ruler
3) World Hierarchy was universal. There were no other hierarchies and no other sources of power on the international scene
4) National power was the reflection of national virtue

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43 Ibid., 37.
44 Ibid., 47.
45 Ibid., 50.
46 Ibid., 32.
47 Ibid., 58.
5) International society was the extension of internal society. Boundaries were cultural.  

I believe that these five assumptions accurately summarize the foundation for the basic foreign economic and political policies adopted by imperial China.

At the center of all issues laid the idea that Chinese culture was supreme, and this extreme culturalism guided many of the actions taken by China over the centuries. The revisionist debate has presented a multitude of reasons and cases in order to explain the great divergence. While specific instances may give proof to specific events leading up to the great divergence, there needs to be further analysis of the effect that culture played in causing these events. I believe the causation for the events, trends, and reasons that lead to the Great Divergence lie in the culturalism that ruled China for two millennia.

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