

Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China* in Katzenstein, ed. *The Culture of National Security* (1996): 216-268.

**Main idea:** Chinese parabellum (hard realpolitik) strategic culture has existed for centuries (at least since the Ming) and has survived virtually unchanged until the present. This parabellum culture is ideationally rooted (thus cultural realism).

**Brief summary:** Johnston sees strategic culture as a shared set of ranked preferences for offensive versus defensive and accommodationist strategies. For culture to exist these preferences have to be consistent over time and across situations. Johnston isolates Chinese strategic culture from the *Seven Military Classics*. While he acknowledges that there are two strands of Chinese strategic thought (the Confucian-Mencian paradigm, which privileges accommodationist, nonviolent strategies for dealing with conflict, and the parabellum paradigm which emphasizes offensive strategies and *quan bian*, or absolute flexibility and sensitivity to changing relative capabilities), Johnston argues that his corpus shows a preference for parabellum strategic culture. He then assumes that since the military have been reading the *Seven Military Classics* since the dawn of the Chinese civilization and study them even today, Chinese strategic culture has remained unchanged. Johnston argues that when leaders are socialized in a parabellum strategic culture, their behavior will reflect the features of this strategic culture and they will exhibit a preference for offensive over defensive and accommodationist strategies. The test is provided by examining the writings of Mao Zedong on nature of conflict (zero sum), the nature of the enemy (conceived in class terms), and the role of conflict (violent struggle not only necessary but desirable). Johnston argues that Chinese conflict behavior under Mao exhibited the offensive characteristics of parabellum culture. He concludes by arguing that ideas, norms, and culture engender and make meaningful structures which could be either anarchic (in the case of realpolitik) or institutionalized (idealpolitik). Realpolitik and idealpolitik behavior flow from these structures. Behavior in turn influences culture, resulting in a circular model.

**Case selection bias:** Johnston provides no convincing explanation for choosing to study Ming China and compare it with Maoist China. Given that the *Seven Military Classics* were in existence for at least a thousand years before the Ming, it is unreasonable to argue that Chinese strategic culture only crystallized with the Ming. In addition, given that the Ming ruled under the constant threat of Mongol invasion, Johnston predetermines his finding of parabellum strategic culture. Were he to focus on the early Qing (to avoid the contaminating influence of foreign ideas that spread in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Qing China), he would probably find evidence substantiating the accommodationist Confucian-Mencian tradition in Chinese politics. In addition, it is difficult to justify the assumption that Chinese strategic culture remained static for so many centuries in spite of different social and political changes that took place in China. However, the biggest theoretical jump is Johnston's assumption that Mao was socialized in a Chinese parabellum culture and that his views on contradictions, war, and the antagonistic competition between the socialism and capitalism were already formed before he ever read Marxist theoreticians, whose arguments were much in line with his own. Apart from Johnston's liberal use of the evidence from the historical record, the

actual selections he cites from Mao were written *after* he became familiar with Western Socialism. This illustrates the difficulty of ascribing causal significance to random factors in individual's lives. There is no falsifiable way of determining how Mao's views were formed.

**Overarching problems:** Even if we assume that Johnston is right and Chinese parabellum culture did exist from the Ming to Mao without ever changing, what does this prove? First, is Chinese culture in any way different from the strategic cultures of other nations (Sol's point)? If we find that other countries have adopted similarly offensive strategies during times of external threat (Mongol invasion for the Ming, Western imperialism for Mao), then the unique "Chineseness" of the parabellum culture Johnston observes is gone. Second, what is the link between culture and behavior? Johnston seems to argue that leaders are socialized within a particular culture (in China, a parabellum culture). Implicitly, behavior consistent with the core set of values contained in parabellum culture is culturally determined. Clearly, such a claim is unrealistic, given that leaders are open to many different (often competing) cultural influences, and that behavior might be culturally informed (you might exhibit a preference for offense over defense) but not determined by culture alone.

On balance, if we accept Johnston's argument distilled from the book and the article, we should believe that a Chinese parabellum culture existed during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and in Mao's China (possibly beyond, though Johnston doesn't quite prove that Mao's successors were as bellicose as him). However, we should challenge Johnston's claim that Chinese culture remained unchanged from the Ming to Mao, unless he explains the accommodationist culture of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). At most, Johnston could argue for *Ming* or *Mao* strategic culture, but not for a continuous *Chinese* parabellum culture.