

China's Strategic Culture

Description

We could perhaps accept that China, as many foresee, will become the first economic power of the planet in the near future. Its glory is not completely foregone, since it depends on the difficulties of their reform process, as well as on the reactions of the developed countries in the West through, among other things, the encouragement of sweeping free trade agreements. Nevertheless, the said reality could be confirmed in a few years.

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It is different, however, to claim that China is equipped with the essential attributes to become established as a comprehensive global power. It would not be so much related to their deficiencies in military or technological matters –which they are trying to correct against the clock enabling policies and millionaire budgets– or to the exacerbation of the political and social contradictions –which will demand an exhaustive attention to internal issues–, but rather to a more subtle and larger issue: the lack of an ideology that could be described as universal.

Today, its cultural influence is limited and viable only in its immediate surroundings. Understood as an ideological challenge for the West, it raises many reservations. If its economic model, still singular in many aspects, suggests the impossibility of its automatic translation to other latitudes, the cultural specificities of its current of thought, and our distancing from its keys, also make its universalisation, or even the slightest miscegenation, very difficult.

That being said, it is worth noting that the East is essential for us, as well as highlighting that the exclusive primacy of Western thinking is a sign of provincialism in our culture, oblivious to any genuinely cosmopolitan effort. In the past decades, we have made great advancements in our economic interaction with Asia, but very few in our understanding of their spiritual universe.

In China, the acknowledgement of that immense gap inspires dynamic foreign cultural policies, which have gained in intensity in the past few years. Their goal for the medium term, as in other fields, is to increase their presence and political influence beyond the Great Wall, although they would acquiesce to being better understood and accepted, raising the respect for diversity flag.

To the inevitable curiosity, we must add the suitability of the culture to achieve an understanding of the logic and behaviour of Chinese authorities, very much indebted to their deepest roots, where the main sources of their predictability lie.

Two texts would be very useful today in this both interactive and investigatory task. The most famous one is *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu; the other, *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, is a classic of the Taoist strategy.

Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is more than 2000 years old, yet it continues to be approached as a completely current work. This is partly due to the right forcefulness of many of its aphorisms but, more than anything, because it is an outstanding part of the legacy of this millenary Chinese civilization exerting a powerful influence in the political behaviour and mentality of today's leaders. The study of history is given a key role in their training, and they rule with a hand in the present and the other one in the past.

Sun Tzu's thinking, in essence, encourages the use of non violent methods in order to attain victory in a conflict. The art of war is based on deceit, he wrote, and it is always preferable to win without fighting. A great part of the Chinese strategic culture agrees with the idea that the key to power is not material force –which does not make it irrelevant–, but rather morals and intelligence. The most efficient force to defeat any hostilities is cultural attraction, which is why the key to achieve an invincible position is to create a civilization that is spiritually superior to others. Encouraging its seductive power

is the best guarantee for a pacific coexistence. The similarities with soft power are evident. This was, partly, what inspired the Tributary Kingdoms in China for several centuries.

Although *The Art of War* is a work of all times, studied in military academies all over the world as well as in universities and business schools, from the point of view of International Relations it is of utmost interest in a moment of transition such as the one we live in.

Many in China compare the fluidity of the present times with the Warring States period (5th to 3rd centuries BC), when this book had high prestige. In this period, immediately subsequent to Sun Tzu's (spring and autumn period), and previous to the foundation of China, several regions strove to win the central power. They were in an internally multipolar China, where the game of relationships and conflicts among the emergent forces, still not in a position to overthrow the hegemonic power, suggests the importance of studying their actions today in order to sense and guide the key elements for the configuration of the cold post-war's order. Chinese strategists have been thoroughly studying that historical period for years, hoping to deduce the keys applicable to the present.

The school of the CPC and its army itself is indebted to this work by Sun Tzu. Mao openly admits its influence on the strategies that allowed him to defeat a much more powerful rival, the Kuomintang. The same could be discerned when Deng Xiaoping emphasized its major contribution to foreign policy in post-maoist China: we must not hasten, but rather wait for the best moment to arrive. This patience, cultivated with alliances (be it SCO, BRICS or others) is what enables a last minute victory. Observing China's foreign policy and contrasting it with Sun Tzu's *Art of War* brightens its outline and allows us to understand the ultimate sense in many behaviours.

The 36 stratagems, on the other side, is a reflection on the art of victory in which the rules for success in the battle against the adversary are gathered. The most celebrated stratagem in China is the one in which we are invited to escape when in adverse conditions. It has nothing to do with our dishonour. Mao, with his Long March, put it in evidence as a means to advance.

The importance given to this text was such that it has always been surrounded by a lot of secrecy, and it only travelled in small circles of military strategists. It was hidden from the larger public until 1979. Within its main inspirational principles, pragmatism and flexibility stand out.

Both works are very relevant for all competitive contexts, and in them we can find basic traces of the Chinese way of thinking, which moulds its philosophy and is not only applicable to the military, but also relevant in areas that go from internal affairs to diplomacy, communication, management in a vast sense of the word, business or social life. A pantry full of instruments with a practical lens.

They both have in common the narration of stratagems to defeat the enemy by using deception and psychological sophistries in a context of hostility. Wisest is who does not fight, or, if he is forced to do so, behaves like water, obtaining victory without struggle. If we analyse the continental policy towards Taiwan, we can fully understand the sense of this strategy. Aggressiveness is not a sign of vigour; power in the East is more associated with fragility and the ability to adapt.

It is not easy for the Western mentality to deeply understand the contents of these two books. The complexity of the ideas they include and the need for transcending the literal sense of every expression require an intimate knowledge of the Chinese culture and civilization to be able to explore their subtleties and unfold their metaphoric senses. But the effort is worth it. Its addition to our own background would liberate us from our unilateralism, providing us with reasons to claim a new ecumenism.

Traducción de Laura Linares Fernández.

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