

Cultural Dimensions to US-China and US-South Korea Relations

John Delury
Senior Fellow, Asia Society
Assistant Professor, Yonsei University

I was asked to present on US perspectives on China's rise and its cultural implications on US-ROK relations. Forgive me for altering the assignment somewhat. In this paper, I reflect on the *political* implications of trends in cultural relations between the US and South Korea based on the contrast with trends in the cultural, versus political, relationship between the US and China. My argument, in essence, is that the cultural base of Sino-American relations is broadening and diversifying—even as USA-PRC relations go up and down. The cultural base of South Korea-America relations is, conversely, narrowing down to the USA-ROK security alliance, which seems good, but could be a negative trend, or at minimum, one that could become a liability in the not so distant future. Let me try to explain this thesis.

Making Room for a Prosperous China

Sino-US relations are broadening and strengthening on a *cultural* level, and are likely to continue to do so, despite fluctuations in PRC-USA relations at the governmental level. This is not often appreciated in East Asia, where the views of a powerful subculture (“the Beltway”) exert a disproportionate influence on the image of how Americans see China.

There is a general recognition among “average Americans” that China is the world's superpower-in-waiting, and that already China's economic growth (and ability to buy US debt) is a pillar on which global economic stability depends.¹ Especially in light of America's costly and unsuccessful embroilments in Afghanistan and Iraq, most Americans would prefer that Washington and Beijing can get along, and that East Asia, in

¹ See Benjamin I. Page and Tao Xie, Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views China, Columbia University Press, 2010, chapter 2.

contrast to the Middle East and Central/ South Asia, is a haven of stability and prosperity.

Americans for the most part do not feel threatened by Chinese culture, values or ideology.² Especially among young people (as I have discovered through teaching in the US), the iconic image of the PRC is now the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in the Bird's Nest rather than the “tank-man” blocking PLA troops in June 1989. A telling indicator of this trend is the increasing enrollments in Mandarin Chinese, in a nation known for its lack of interest in foreign languages. More and more American parents consider knowledge of China and Mandarin essential parts of learning to succeed in the 21st century.

Cultural attitudes toward a rising China on “Main Street” are generally speaking more positive than on “K Street.” Recent empirical work by Benjamin Page and Tao Xie shows that Americans have “overwhelmingly favorable” views toward Chinese culture.³ The Chinese government is actively, and fairly effectively, promoting this trend. The Beijing Olympics is a good case study in how this positive image is being promoted and embraced.

The ultimate PR success of the Olympics is astonishing considering just how bad things were in the first half of 2008, with the uprising in Tibet and disastrous “Torch of Harmony” worldwide tour over the summer. Tibet issues resonate strongly in the United States, where the Dalai Lama enjoys a kind of “rock star” status. Riot police in Lhasa threatened to revive the Tiananmen Massacre image of China. Then the Olympic Torch burned its way across the planet, drawing contentious demonstrations in Paris, San Francisco, Seoul, with human rights and pro-Tibet crowds clashing against Chinese patriots. I was in Seoul at the time, and remember TV news showing Chinese in Seoul screaming down protestors, and hearing the indignation of many Koreans at the fact that pro-Beijing demonstrators had beaten up Koreans in their own country. The long-awaited Beijing Olympics, the new CCP’s “coming out party,” was looking like it was heading for global PR disaster.

In the immediate lead up to the Games, there was a toxic “negative” story that threatened to turn the media against Beijing: journalists in the Olympic Village couldn’t get unfettered Internet access. After briefly toying with a conservative, knee-jerk response that “foreign media have to obey Chinese law,” the PRC authorities astutely decided to unblock Internet access for journalists, and that was the end of it. From there

² See Stefan Halper, The Beijing Consensus: How China’s Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century, Basic Books, 2010, which is notable for having to persuade readers that China is in fact a long-term threat in terms of the values and model it represents.

³ See Living with the Dragon, C-100 2008 survey.

on out, the coverage was overwhelmingly positive, feeding into and dramatizing the energizing image of a rising China.⁴

The Olympic opening ceremony is culturally quite interesting, and relevant to our topic. The ceremony created the fiction of a peacefully-rising China, rooted in its ancient tradition of “harmony” *he* 和, and today, at long last, achieving wealth, power and “modernity,” without threatening the world (the imagined tradition of Admiral Zheng He). Beijing tapped true talent—film director Zhang Yimou, pyrotechnic artist Cai Guoqiang, designer and architect Ai Weiwei—to show off the new China to a global audience. The opening ceremony was like watching yet another highly polished, historically uninteresting Zhang Yimou film, but it probably worked magic on hundreds of millions of foreign viewers—almost none of whom have seen Zhang’s early, truly inspired films. What a change in the relationship between art and the state in 20 years: from the crude white Goddess of Democracy statue in 1989 to the 100-million-dollar Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the Olympic Opening! But US coverage made no reference to this transformation, nor critique the authoritarian nature of the production—no critical comparisons to North Korea’s Arirang Mass Games or Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, both of which would have been appropriate. Instead, the Olympics imprinted in a billion minds a positive image of China’s rise, an image those minds were predisposed to accept.

China’s soft power campaign, with neo-traditionalist overtones manifest in the Olympics opening ceremony, continues in many forms. Confucius Institutes are sprouting up around the world, and across the US (about 70 at present). They are well funded and well run. I taught at Brown University in Rhode Island, and discovered that the smallest state in the USA (population 1 million) claims two Confucius Institutes. I attended sold-out lectures by historian Jonathan Spence and China watcher Orville Schell in the auditorium of Bryant University. In the front row on both occasions sat a PRC diplomatic team. (It made me wonder how the two Thomas Jefferson Institutes in Hainan Province are doing by comparison.)

Another PRC state-funded soft power program called Confucius Classrooms targets grade school children. Confucius Classrooms are growing in pilot states

⁴ NBC sports anchor Bob Costas held a rather remarkable interview with President George W. Bush at the Games. Costas challenged Bush with the argument that the US was losing leverage as China grew wealthier and more powerful. Bush said Americans should look at US-China relations not in terms of “leverage,” but rather as one of “constructive engagement where you can find common areas like North Korea and Iran but also be in a position where they respect you enough to listen to your views on things like religious freedom and political liberty.” How far we have come in two short years, in rhetoric if not also in reality.

Minnesota (with 12) and North Carolina (with 45). The University of Chicago's Confucius Institute coordinates a network of 43 Confucius Classrooms that reaches over 12,000 students. Asia Society is building a network of Confucius Classrooms in 100 schools across the country. Chinese language programs are growing in K-12 (Asia Society estimates a 200% increase from 2004 to 2008) and expanding rapidly at the university level.⁵ On my daily subway ride from Brooklyn to Manhattan, I'd see grade-school kids as un-Chinese-looking as me wearing "bilingual" *shuangwen* 双文 school uniform T-shirts, hoping off the F train in Chinatown for class.

We are also just beginning to see the manifestations of the USD \$6.58 billion "overseas propaganda initiative" *waixuan gongzuo* 外宣工作 sponsored by the Chinese government, to be carried out through Xinhua, China Daily and CCTV. In New York, I noticed the increase in requests for TV interviews in English by Chinese news crews, staffed by impressive bilinguals, including Ivy league graduates; and a couple of my bright former students have ended up working for *China Daily* in Beijing. Chinese media outlets are slowly becoming integrated into the global news discourse, on par with BBC and CNN, and climbing out of the ghetto of Chinese propaganda organs (even though freedom of the press is much less assured in China than the US or Europe).

Still Skeptical Toward a Powerful China

What significance do these broader cultural trends and media shifts have on the realm of "high politics" and government relations? For this, it worth a quick survey of developments in the brief Obama-Hu era.

The liberal Democrats who came into power with President Obama hoped to craft a China-friendly foreign policy, and there was a great deal of positive energy, optimism even, about "G2" and "a new chapter in Sino-US relations" in 2008 and 2009. It became a platitude among China folks to discuss how great it was that there was virtually no China bashing during the US presidential campaign. With the Obama-Clinton team in place, think tankers went to work on grand plans for US-China cooperation on climate change. The Center on US-China Relations at Asia Society was among this group, and received Secretary Clinton's blessing in her person during her first major policy speech, at Asia Society, on her way for her first overseas trip, to Asia.

⁵ See Asia Society, "[Meeting the Challenge: Preparing Chinese Language Teachers for American Schools](#)," 2010.

Of course, things didn't pan out as the Sino-US collaborationists hoped. Obama's summit trip to Beijing in November was seen as a setback in the US, and Copenhagen was seen as a travesty, striking a nearly fatal blow to the idea of a grand new era of Sino-US cooperation on carbon reductions. The Obama Administration, with the support of moderates, got tough in Copenhagen's wake, and US-China relations went into a tailspin early in 2010 over arms sales to Taiwan, meeting with the Dalai Lama, and the Google controversy. At the government and foreign policy elite level, US-China relations remain unstable, and fairly tense—Hu Jintao's visit to Washington in April for Obama's Nuclear Security Summit improved the atmosphere considerably, but different responses to the Cheonan tragedy recently triggered another, very negative spiral.

However, when it comes to economics, neither Beijing nor DC wants to rock the boat too hard. And diplomatic vicissitudes are *not* playing out on a broader social-cultural level in the US (arguably, a broader part of the Chinese public—although not the majority—gets riled up about state-to-state conflicts). China remains incredibly “hot” among young Americans; conscientious American parents want their kids to learn some Mandarin; Beijing is the place of opportunity for more and more college grads; tourism to China continues to grow. I would wager that most Americans do not buy the argument that excessive Chinese willingness to purchase US T-bills caused the financial crisis; rather, they are impressed by China's ability to weather the storm, and sustain high growth levels despite huge drops in export demand. Likewise, although China was seen as a spoiler to some extent in Copenhagen, most Americans are honest enough with themselves to recognize that China is not the bad guy behind global warming, but rather, we all are—certainly the US, far and away the world's least energy efficient major economy.

Broadening cultural relations do not ensure good political relations, and many Americans remain wary of the political implications of China's rise—that is to say, they are more comfortable with a wealthy China than a powerful one. However, the perceived economic benefits of and cultural curiosity toward an increasingly prosperous China soften the geo-political tensions that persist between the two governments. This is in contrast to the situation with Korea.

Illusions of the Golden Age in USA-ROK Alliance

In surveying the cultural landscape of US-South Korea relations, it is hard to find such broadening. Rather, Gi-Wook Shin's thesis on asymmetry remains the case, and increasingly so: for Koreans, the US and US-Korea relations are a matter of identity, and of broad popular concern; for Americans, South Korea and US-ROK relations are an

issue of policy—especially security policy—and are of interest to only a very small part of the population.⁶

The apparent exception proves the rule. In the US, the one source of deeper historical resonance about Korea is the Korean War, and the one topic of regular media attention is the DPRK. But the Korean War is known as the “forgotten war,” and has none of the cultural significance of the Vietnam War. And North Korea is brought to the attention of Main Street Americans within a framework of security policy—the nuclear threat. By contrast, the security concerns generated by China’s rise are but one of many “China stories” that are of interest to and followed by average Americans.

USA-PRC relations are now oscillating between cooperation and conflict, but within a broader American cultural dynamic of increasing interest in and knowledge about China. USA-ROK relations are increasingly close, but on the narrow base of security policy. This base is the familiar, and perhaps outdated, “regional security architecture” for East Asia—anchored in America’s “security assurances” to allies Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan; justified by confronting the immediate North Korean threat; undergirded by facing the long-term China challenge.

The one-dimensional significance of North Korea as “security threat” is unproblematic in an American context, where North Korea is an uncomplicated evil leftover of the Cold War, and where the North Korean threat *is* the rationale behind the USA-ROK relationship. But the situation in South Korea would seem to be less simple, and less stable.

It is not difficult, for example, to imagine a shift by a majority of South Koreans in views on inter-Korean relations and policy toward North Korea, away from security containment and prioritization of good relations with allies, back to broad-based engagement and prioritization of improving inter-Korean relations. Even many who supported President Lee Myung-bak “quid pro quo” approach did so in the hope that it would eventually lead back to a new era of inter-Korean integration, but on the basis of mutual respect. If “Vision 3000” only has the effect of increasing tension and severing ties, the policy may well lose broad-based support. A shift by the South Korean public and leadership could be sparked by unexpected developments in the North, or could one day simply snap under the pressure of relentless deterioration in inter-Korean relations, combined with steady growth in Sino-North Korean ties.

So, what happens if South Koreans vote in 2012 for a president with a mandate for a very different North Korea policy, even some kind of “Sunshine Policy II”? Or,

⁶ Gi-Wook Shin, One Alliance, Two Lenses: US-Korea Relations in a New Era, Stanford, 2010.

sooner than that, President Lee Myung-bak switches tracks and presses for an inter-Korean summit? Support from the US would be essential—this is one lesson of the failure of the Sunshine Policy under Kim Dae-jung, who was undercut early on by George W. Bush, as well as Roh Moo-hyun, whose anti-Americanism was arguably self-defeating, at least as far as improving inter-Korean relations was concerned. But the continuation of current trends might make policy coordination in changed circumstances exceptionally difficult. If the USA-ROK alliance continues to flourish only on the “hard” track of sanctions, counter-proliferation, military defense, and contingency planning, US institutional and defense interests will grow deeply vested in continuing along the hard track. Financial sanctions officials in Treasury; nonproliferation hawks in the National Security Council; China threat voices both civilian and military—these would function as vested interests in a hard approach, with little in the way of countervailing forces.

And here I return to the instructive contrast with China, where the broad-based process of “making room for China” diversifies the nature of the relationship, developing more and more points of contact, interaction, interest—leaving political leaders with room to maneuver in crafting China policy. Increased cultural understanding of China acts like a shock absorber, softening some of the ups and downs in USA-PRC relations, and also serves China’s long-term interests. For example, Americans have an increased appreciation of Mainland Chinese views on importance of cross-straits relations. China’s immutable desire to reunify with Taiwan is increasingly recognized—whereas Koreans’ fundamental yearning for reunification is increasingly called into doubt, or simply ignored.

USA-ROK relations would seem to be in a mini-golden age, when the threat from the North seems so clear (renunciation of Six Party Talks, satellite test, missile tests, nuclear tests, submarine attack), and security policy coordination between the two capitals is smooth. The danger is precisely that the USA-ROK alliance qua security alliance feels too good, which, in the absence of countervailing forces or diversifying elements, constricts the nature and perception of US interests in South Korea to one of “bulwark against North Korean nuclear proliferation.”