

# *Misperception due to Culture Differences between China and US*

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the historical and cultural factors of a country affect national cognition and are one of the major causes of misperception of other countries, which then increases the odds of conflicts between states. The argument is made by analyzing the misperception of the China threat theory, the Sino-US involvement in the Korean War, and Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

**Keywords:** Misperception, Culture difference, China threat theory, Korean War, Pelosi's visit to Taiwan

## 1. Introduction

Why does the United States feel a great threat to China's self-perceived peaceful rise to power? Why did the Korean War still break out and escalate even when the two sides of the Cold War wanted to avoid conflict? Why did the recent visit of US Foreign Minister Pelosi to Taiwan island cause misperceptions and strong conflicts between China and the United States? More generally, why misperception is so common among states of different cultures? I believe that in addition to interests, the misperceptions caused by cultural differences between China and the US are an important reason for these contradictions and conflicts.

The theories of international relations are complex and developing. The three macro theories - realism, liberalism, and constructivism - are basic theories, but they cannot fully explain international problems, let alone predict them. This paper makes an analysis and research from the new interdisciplinary perspective of psychology, history, and culture, and tries to supplement the original theory of international relations dominated by western experience with a new perspective. The purpose of the study is to reduce the misperceptions caused by culture and values, thus reducing misunderstanding and conflict.

This paper argues that the historical and cultural factors of a country affect national cognition and are one of the major causes of misperception of other countries, which then increases the odds of conflicts between states. The argument is made by analyzing the misperception of the China threat theory, the Sino-US involvement in the Korean War, and Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

This article proceeds in three sections: First, I discuss Robert Jervis's theory of misperception and an important missing aspect of the theory: cultural differences and collective perception. Second, I explain how cultural differences create misperceptions through the topic of China threat theory. Last, I add to the theory proposed in the second section, stating that it is cultural differences that lead to

misperception, and misperception that can cause conflict. I explain this full theory through the lens of significant events in the Korean War and the current events relating to Pelosi.

## 2. Theoretical Section

The theory raised in this paper was that cultural differences between countries lead to misperceptions which cause conflicts. I will further explain it in this section.

Misperception is a wrong or incorrect understanding or interpretation. People/individuals have misperceptions. From a cognition psychological perspective, perception is the process of interpreting the objectified world. Perceptions are based on the external objective world, but it also reflects the personal views/internal subjective world. It is as if looking at the objective world through a layer of filters or coloured glasses. Different people have different internal subjective worlds based on their innate temperament, acquired experience, accumulated knowledge, and the environment they are in. Thus, people can have a false or inaccurate perception, also known as misperception.

Countries also can have misperceptions. By nature, countries are made up of many individuals. Individuals in a country share some common historical and cultural values. Therefore, the groups formed by these individuals will have some collective common perception. However, due to different historical and cultural values, different countries will have different collective perceptions, which will easily lead to cognitive bias or misperception toward other countries. For example, China's Kowtow (which means to kneel and bow) ceremony was seen by the British envoy Macartney who went to the Qing Dynasty China as an act of self-humiliation. He wanted only to kneel on one knee; the Chinese emperor views refusing to Kowtow to be a sign of great disrespectfulness. The Kowtow issue was even discussed for several weeks [1].

Robert Jervis has done deep research on the topic of misperception from the personal psychological level. He analysed and studied how the personal factors of the national decision-makers caused the behaviour and policies. He believed that the decision-makers were prone to misperception, and in most cases, they exaggerated the hostility of the other side. This made it so conflict was more likely between two sides.

Jarvis's theory is very convincing, but it has two limitations. Firstly, his theory should not be limited to the level of decision-makers. Rather, it should be extended to the level of the public and the country [2]. On one hand, the decision-making of a country is often not decided only by one or a few people, especially in democratic countries. On the other hand, in the current information society, media is developing at a drastic rate. The decision-making of the country will be more affected by the collective opinions of the people, that is, social public opinion. Therefore, it is necessary to extend this theory of Jervis to the collective and national levels. Secondly, Jervis's research avoids the influence of different cultural and social backgrounds on people's perceptions. He explains that if individuals in similar cultural backgrounds have misperceptions people in different cultural comparisons will inevitably make similar, but more serious, misperceptions [3]. Although I agree with his explanation, that the cultural factor was too important to be excluded. Not only does it make the misperception more serious, but it can also be the most fundamental reason for misperception.

I believe that the difference in history and culture is an important reason for the misperception of one country towards another country. Jervis pointed out that one mechanism that causes misperception was cognitive consistency. Cognitive consistency is when people have their original understanding of world affairs, and after recognizing new things, they will refer to past knowledge and experience, and unconsciously make new information consistent with their original understanding [3]. Another mechanism that causes misperception is a historical burden [3][4]. Similar to the idea of cognitive consistency, the historical burden idea is using past knowledge and known experiences to understand and speculate on the unknown. I believe Jervis's theory for the individual can apply to a country. A country's history, culture, and values are condensed from past knowledge

and experience and are passed down from generation to generation through collective consciousness and collective unconsciousness [5]. Shang Huipeng believed "a country is composed of people, and people are essentially a kind of cultural existence. The accumulated experience and historical memory of people in a specific social culture will produce 'collective experience' composed of different social representation systems and knowledge systems, thus forming different cultures" [6].

### 3. Cultural Differences Create Different Interpretations of the China Threat Theory

China threat theory assumes that China cannot and will not rise to power in peace [7]. It argues that China will actively seek to subvert the West and the current world order and needs to be restricted by the West [8]. Many western scholars, even scholars who study Chinese culture support this theory. For example, Andrew Scobell argues that China regards itself as a purely defensive and peaceful country but utilizes the duality of Confucian and Realpolitik ideas to manoeuvre between the ideas of defence and offense. China also covers up its aggressive and offensive actions with the idea of "active defence" or "defending the country" [9]. Alastair Iain Johnston argues the same point as well, expanding on how the basis of China's military being the "Seven military classics" that are still used today makes their strategic culture indifferent to the aggressive strategic culture in the past and relating the point to realpolitik and idealpolitik [10].

I do not agree with these two scholars. Firstly, I believe the core of every country has two sides: Realism and liberalism. Moreover, every country's foreign propaganda emphasises on freedom and peace, while its actions are often more based on practical interests. Diverse elements of a society's culture provide fertile soil for cherry-picking and misperception [11]. Secondly, these two scholars may be more familiar with modern conflicts China is involved in: the Korean War and conflicts with the Soviet Union, India, and Vietnam. But the context of these wars is that China just ended its semi-colonial period, and still had a strong sense of insecurity, which was exacerbated by the tension during the Cold War. Moreover, the important reason behind these conflicts was ideological issues, but the ideology of Marxism was not native to China but from modern Europe. Furthermore, Michael Ruskin now believes optimistically that China's current only ideology is its economic growth [12]. In all, these two scholars studied Chinese culture from the perspective of the West, and they do not have a deep understanding of Chinese culture, so they have misperceptions as a result.

To explain the international relations of non-Western countries with the current international relations theory based on Western historical and cultural values would result in incomplete and incorrect explanations [13][14]. So, Shang Huipeng researched the unique human relations system and international relations system in ancient China using a Psycho-cultural Approach (Shang's approach was different from Samuel Huntington's study from the perspective of a civilization in general rather than a country).

Shang believes that compared with the "individual" mode of thought in the West, the relationship of Chinese people is centred on themselves, and is expanded into three circles. From the inside out is the "circle of the family", the "circle of familiar people" and the "circle of strangers". The Chinese people relationship system consistent with the structure of "To cultivate the moral self, regulate the family, maintain the state rightly and make all peaceful" and "love based on status" in Confucianism. Compared with the Mohist school stresses "universal love" and undifferentiated love, "Love based on status" is a kind of love not equal, depending on the distance of relationship.

The ancient Chinese international relations system, the "tributary system", was developed from this Chinese people relationship system. Accordingly, the central dynasty/country was like the parent of this family, with the highest status and greater responsibility. Non-core vassal states, like children, respected their parents and accept their protection. The "tributary system" emphasizes morals, peace, and order, which originates from the family ethic of China [6]. It was the model of the international order in East Asia that had existed for more than two thousand years, which was very different from

the colonial system of the western ancient Roman Empire and the modern Westphalia international system. Shang Huipeng believes that compared with the "Hobbes culture", "Locke culture" and "Kant culture" existing in the modern Westphalian international system, the tributary system can be regarded as "family culture", "familiar people culture" and "stranger culture" [6].

Shang Huipeng believes that even if China rises its power, it will not necessarily fall into the so-called Thucydides Trap. Firstly, Shang Huipeng pointed out that the "tributary system" did not exploit and enslave the surrounding vassal states, nor did it change their way of life and religions. Most of the time, the relationship between the two was only symbolic. For example, Zheng He did not establish overseas colonies when he went to the West. Secondly, most of the wars fought by China in Chinese history were to defend the northern Nomads [6]. The construction of the Great Wall also shows that it is defensive rather than offensive. These historical examples naturally refute the "China Threat Theory".

I believe that the main purpose behind China's rise to power is not to pursue its interests but to make up for the insecurity caused by the "century of humiliation" and to gain respect. Although the tributary system does not exist anymore, China still maintains the mentality of being the leader. In fact, this kind of leader mentality like the leader mentality of the United States today. China seeks more status and face. Michael Ruskin understands this, saying: "the humiliation China experienced in a century has increased the fury of Chinese nationalism. Everything China does, from rapid economic growth to nuclear weapons to spacecraft, is the expression of China's deep but hurt nationalistic ideas [12]".

I believe another purpose of China's rise to power is to solve its problems with identity. Shang Huipeng pointed out that after the collapse of the tributary system, China was excluded from the modern international system for a long time. China's position changed from being the core of one system to being on the edge of another system. China once thought that regions not affected by Chinese culture were "barbarians". Now it seems that it has become the so-called "barbarians" in the face of Western civilization. So it has brought about the anxiety of identity in China today [6]. I believe that China's identity problem as a country can also be compared with the identity problem of immigrants in the process of globalization with the feeling of loss, anxiety, grievance, and even anger.

Besides, due to the lack of a deep understanding of China's "familiar people" culture and tributary system, some of China's current actions will likely be misinterpreted by the west, deepening their concerns about China's rise to power. "The Belt and Road", the relationship between China, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and the Silk Road are all examples of China's actions current actions that have been misinterpreted. Historically, the Chinese government subsidized students from third-world countries to study in China free of charge resulting in students from various countries gathering in Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, China is more inclined to think that these actions are taking care of its surrounding affiliated countries as they did in ancient times, while the West may feel more threatened.

To summarize, China's rise to power may not be as strong, aggressive, and intimidating as the West generally perceives it to be. Both China and the West need to realize that misperceptions are caused by the differences in historical cultures between each other. The West should avoid reawakening China's fear and humility caused by invasions in history, while China should try to avoid overreacting to the actions of the West.

#### **4. Real-World Examples: Korean War and Pelosi Visiting Taiwan**

In the previous section, the paper explains, through the example of "China threat Theory", the first part of the theory: "culture difference leads to misperceptions". In this section, two samples demonstrate the full theory: "Culture difference leads to misperception, and misperception can cause conflict."

There were many misperceptions during the Korean War, some were caused by cultural differences. One was China's misperception of the Seventh Fleet of the US entering the Taiwan Strait after North Korea had invaded South Korea. Truman regards this action as "neutral". He not only cited the importance of Taiwan's defence but also called on Taiwan to cease all operations against the mainland [1]. But Mao Zedong did not feel any peaceful intention behind the action. Instead, he thought that this was the invasion of China's territorial waters by the US imperialists.

Mao's misperception apparently came from the modern Chinese semi-colonial history he had experienced, which made him and all Chinese people very sensitive to any sign of possible invasion. However, on a deeper level, Mao's misperception originated from the large difference in culture and values between China and US, and Mao's lack of depth in terms of understanding US culture and values. Kissinger who understood both countries pointed out that "Both Societies believe they represent unique values. American exceptionalism is missionary. It holds that the United States has an obligation to spread its values to every part of the world. China's exceptionalism is cultural [1]." It is difficult for a country that does not have the proselytize in its dictionary to realize that it is being proselytized by another country.

As a result, Mao, as well as the members of the CCP, felt great hostility and threat. On the 28th of June 1950, Ambassador Zhou Enlai stated publicly that: "All the Chinese people will work with one heart and one mind to liberate Taiwan from the US invaders" [15]. Unfortunately, this misperception of the move of the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait became one of the reasons why China sent troops to escalate the Korean conflict. Although Chinese people were in famine and destitute after years of war, they still strongly supported China's participation in the Korean War. It can be seen that the people's collective misperception of the image of western countries as invaders is consistent with their leader Mao.

The US sent troops into the Korean War partially because they thought China would not send troops into the War. This was mainly because of the power gap between the two countries and the time, making China's chances of winning very small, which would later become a classic misperception of China by the US.

Besides, different scholars have always had different views on the reasons why China sent troops into the Korean War. I would like to add a new interpretation, that is, China wants to continue to fulfil its obligations as the leader of the "tributary system". Korea has long been a vassal state of China. In the Ming Dynasty, China sent troops to help Korea defeat the Japanese invaders. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, China had become weak. It could only watch as Korea got annexed by Japan but was unable to help. Later, China was even invaded by Japan through Korea. Therefore, in Mao Zedong's and Chinese people's eyes, sending troops to North Korea was China's moral obligation and to gain back dignity. Unfortunately, the US thought that China would not fight a battle that was unwinnable because of the power gap. Thus, they didn't think that China would send troops. This misperception caused them to cross the 38th parallel and engage in direct frontal conflict with the Chinese army.

Both countries based their ideas on their culture and values and misperceived their opponent's actions. Both sides believed that their course of action was morally correct, but the results show that it caused an escalation of conflict.

Similarly, the theory of " Culture differences lead to misperception, and misperception causes conflict" was clearly reflected in the recent event of Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. History does rhyme. Pelosi was just like the Seventh Fleet in the previous case. Pelosi believed by visiting Taiwan that she was just supporting the democracy and freedom of Taiwan; while China believes that US imperialism is trying to split China. Such a huge difference in the perception between the two sides has led to violent political and diplomatic turbulence and conflicts.

Moreover, Pelosi and a lot of American people believe that China's lack of "democracy and freedom" is an extremely serious problem and intolerable; while China doesn't think it is a big issue. On one hand, China traditionally is in a hierarchical society, and Confucianism, supported hierarchy mostly, among the pre-Qin scholars at the time. According to the level of occupation, the rank ranges from the emperor to the aristocrat, the scholar, the farmer, the industrialist and the lowly. On the other hand, the relationship of human relations in China stresses three principles: monarch and minister, father and son, and husband and wife. Hierarchy emphasizes order and obedience. There are countless historical stories in China that promote such values, which have penetrated the subconscious of the Chinese people and Chinese culture for thousands of years. On the other hand, under the ideology of Marxist-Leninism, China has pushed the Chinese traditional idea of "emphasizing order and neglecting freedom" to the extreme by emphasizing Collectivism. Collectivism advocates that individuals are subordinate to society and that individual interests should be subordinated and even sacrificed for the interests of the group, the nation, and the state, which has been long publicized by the Chinese government. Even in some extreme historical periods, pursuing personal interests was considered to be evil and seriously criticized. The values of collectivism have been deeply rooted in Chinese society. We can also see that there is a certain consistency between the ancient hierarchical society and the modern collectivist society.

Although the West has also experienced an autocratic hierarchical society, under the background of the bourgeois revolution era, Locke, known as the father of liberalism, put forward the individualistic political concept, opposed autocracy, advocated democracy, and emphasized that the individual was the first and the state was the second. The idea of individualism subsequently took root in the West. Shang Huipeng even referred to American culture as "Rugged Individualism" (Shang believes that people's sense of security comes from close social relations and culture. While in Western individualism society, individuals are more difficult to establish close relationships with other. Therefore, the United States worships "interests" and "strength" in diplomacy. There is also a lack of security in the relations between countries, namely "Hobbes fear", which will lead to a "security dilemma".) [6].

The hierarchy versus equality, autocracy versus democracy, and extreme collectivism versus rugged individualism in China and the US show that the core values of the two countries are almost the opposite. Therefore, in the diplomatic event of Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the Americans saw more justice and the Chinese saw more hostility.

Lee Kuan Yew, who was influenced by both Chinese and Western cultures, believed that people tend to recognize and judge each other from their values and codes of conduct. Therefore, the key to understanding each other lies in the proximity or consistency of values or ideologies. It is very difficult for human beings to understand each other. However, without understanding, there will be no trust, which will lead to uneasiness, anxiety, confusion, and conflict. Huntington's clash of civilizations shares a similar view. Unfortunately, China and US seem to be often bound to the theory "Cultural differences → Misconception → Conflict"

## 5. Conclusion

This paper puts forward the theory of "Cultural differences → Misconception → Conflict" in international relations area. This theory not only emphasizes the importance of culture but also adds a psychological perspective to study misperception, making this theory different from other constructivism theories.

When the pandemic has changed the whole world, Sino-US relations have declined in correlation with the pandemic. It became a sensitive and conflict-prone point in current international relations, and a hot topic of discussion in the academic community. By analysing the confusion of the China

threat theory, the Sino-US involvement in the Korean War, and Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the essay demonstrates the proposed theory and makes the theory more realistic and integrative in the current world.

I believe that only when leaders and people of China and the United States understand each other's history and culture, they can have a more objective understanding of each other, thereby reducing mutual hostility and possible conflicts. In particular, under the plight caused by the epidemic, it is even more important to avoid deliberately exaggerating this kind of misperception to create conflicts and use external contradictions to transfer domestic contradictions. Such actions are short-sighted and dangerous and are not conducive to peace and the long-term interests of all countries.

The perspective of misperception is very important and interesting and can be further explored in the future. Jervis has studied it from many cognitive perspectives, while this paper studies it from the historical and cultural level of the country. There are still more perspectives, such as "emotion": the tendency to do good things in the country I like; and "interests": thinking that things that are beneficial to me are good for everyone. There are also some psychological concepts for individuals that can also be integrated into the level of a country and thus international relations, such as the trauma and the compulsive repetition of a country [16].

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