

Culture Clash? Apologies East and West

PETER HAYS GRIES AND KAIPING PENG*

Following the 1 April 2001 plane collision over the South China Seas, China and the United States engaged in two weeks of intensive 'apology diplomacy'. What role did culture play in these events? Drawing on experimental findings in social and cross-cultural psychology, we argue against the pundits that essentialized cultural difference—and against those who denied that culture matters. Instead, we maintain that both cultural differences and cultural commonalities played a significant role in Sino–American apology diplomacy.

On April Fools Day 2001, an American E-P3 surveillance plane and a Chinese F-8 jet fighter collided over the South China Seas. The E-P3 made it safely to China's Hainan Island; the F-8 tore apart and crashed, and pilot Wang Wei is now presumed dead.

A few days later, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called an unusual late-night news conference. Spokesman Zhu Bangzao, his rage clearly visible, declared: 'The United States should take full responsibility, make an apology to the Chinese government and people, and give us an explanation of its actions'. Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan and President Jiang Zemin soon reiterated this demand.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell initially responded with equal bluntness: 'We have nothing to apologize for'. Viewing the aggressiveness of the Chinese jet as the cause of the collision, Americans did not feel responsible. As Senator Joseph Lieberman said on CNN's *Larry King Live*, 'When you play chicken, sometimes you get hurt'.

The impasse was broken after 11 days of intensive negotiations. Ambassador Joseph Prueher gave a letter to Foreign Minister Tang: 'Please convey to the Chinese people and to the family of pilot Wang Wei that we are very sorry for their loss ... We are very sorry the entering of China's airspace and the landing did not have verbal clearance'. Having extracted an 'apology' from Washington, Beijing released the 24 American servicemen. In this Chinese view, Jiang, 'diplomatic strategist extraordinaire', had won a major diplomatic victory.¹

The American spin was quite different. Powell denied that America had apolo-

* Peter Hays Gries is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He is Co-Director of the Sino–American Security Dialogue, and author of the forthcoming *Saving Face: Pride and Passion in China's New Nationalism*. Peng Kaiping is Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. He is Director of the Culture and Cognition Lab at the UC-Berkeley Institute of Personality and Social Research, and author of over 30 books and research articles on cultural and social psychology published in Chinese and English.

1. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, 'Behind the scenes in Beijing's corridors of power', *CNN*, (11 April 2001).

gized, again asserting, ‘There is nothing to apologize for. To apologize would have suggested that we have done something wrong or accepted responsibility for having done something wrong. And we did not do anything wrong’.

Politics was clearly central to such spin: Beijing and Washington were jockeying for position in the post-Cold War international order.

But what role did culture play in this ‘apology diplomacy’?

Samuel Huntington has asserted that the post-Cold War world is divided into civilizations marked by fundamental cultural difference.² A number of Western pundits have followed Huntington in suggesting that the post-plane collision fallout confirms that Chinese civilization is both different and dangerous. The Chinese, in this view, are obsessed with ‘saving face’. ‘Beijing’s false accusation of US responsibility’, Jim Hoagland writes in *The Washington Post*, is ‘a reflexive act of pride’. Jiang, it seems, is ‘getting personal’ by drawing a ‘line in the sand’ with Bush.³ This irrational emotionalism, such Western pundits assert, is rooted in Chinese tradition. Writing in *The New York Times*, Fox Butterfield searches for the cultural roots of China’s demand for an American apology. Quoting prominent China scholars Lucian Pye and Merle Goldman, Butterfield locates the cultural origins of Chinese behavior in ‘Chinese child-rearing practices’—and the ‘old Confucian tradition of conformity’.⁴ To these Western pundits, a cruel Confucian culture lies at the heart of Communist tyranny.

Other pundits, by contrast, have denied that culture played any role in Chinese behavior, depicting Beijing’s response as purely instrumental. The *Financial Times*’ James Kyngé focused on foreign policy: Jiang Zemin ‘seized on the incident to demand a halt to US air surveillance missions near the Chinese coastline’.⁵ On the *PBS Newshour*, former ambassador to China Winston Lord highlighted Beijing’s domestic objectives: it is ‘extremely tempting for [Beijing] ... to use foreign devils and invoke nationalism to distract the populace’.⁶ Beijing, in this view, is simply cold and calculating.

We argue against pathologizing the Orient and essentializing cultural difference. Chinese and Americans do not differ in kind: we are all, after all, human beings. But we also caution against the reduction of human motivation to the rational calculation of material costs and benefits. Culture does matter: cultural differences clearly played a major role in Sino–American apology diplomacy. The trick is to capture the role of both cultural differences and cultural commonalities in shaping international affairs.

Cultural differences

Recent experimental findings in cross-cultural psychology have revealed significant East–West differences in both causal reasoning and responsibility assessment.

2. See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

3. Jim Hoagland, ‘Regarding China, is it getting personal?’, *The Washington Post*, (4 April 2001), p. A23.

4. Fox Butterfield, ‘China’s demand for apology is rooted in tradition’, *The New York Times*, (7 April 2001).

5. James Kyngé, ‘China calls for apology over collision’, *Financial Times* (London), (4 April 2001), p. 12.

6. ‘Spy plane standoff’, *PBS NewsHour*, (3 April 2001). See http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia/jan-june01/china_4-3.html.

These are differences of degree, not kind, but they can help account for the disparate Chinese and American responses to the plane collision.

Cross-cultural psychologists juxtapose Western analytic and Eastern holistic reasoning. Western reasoning tends to focus on objects and categories, and is driven by formal logic; in the East, by contrast, reasoning embraces contradictions among objects in a yin–yang field of constant change.⁷ In the case of the plane collision, Western pundits, searching for ‘the’ (one and only) cause of the accident, focused their gaze on the pilots and their planes. There was much talk in the Western press, therefore, about the Chinese and American pilots and the lumbering EP-3 and the speedy F-8. An analytic style of reasoning, in other words, led many Americans to view Wang Wei and his F-8 as the cause of the collision.

This search for a single ‘cause’ of the accident struck many Chinese as odd. They tended to look instead to the bigger picture. And the circumstantial evidence was damning. The accident occurred off the Chinese coast, and at a time when America was increasing the frequency of its surveillance flights. The new Bush administration, furthermore, was aggressively pursuing a National Missile Defense (NMD) initiative that fundamentally undermines China’s national security. The Bush team had also embraced Cold War rhetoric, repudiating Clinton’s China policy of ‘engagement’, and declaring China America’s ‘competitor’.⁸ And following on the heels of the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the plane collision appeared as yet another example of American bullying. Both the Belgrade bombing and the plane collision fit perfectly into the emerging ‘victimization narrative’ of Chinese suffering at the hands of the West during the ‘Century of Humiliation’ from the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars to World War II. Under Mao, China’s encounter with the West was largely told within a ‘victor’ framework in which the masses heroically defeated feudal and imperialist forces. In the past five years, however, many Chinese have begun to confront their past victimization, generating anger and contributing to a tendency to ascribe hostile intent to ambiguous incidents involving the West. A holistic approach to the political and historic *context* of the plane collision, in sum, helps account for the Chinese view of American belligerence.

Cross-cultural psychologists have also found significant differences in the ways that Westerners and Easterners tend to assess responsibility: the former concentrate more on culpability, where the latter highlight consequences. The distinction is comparable to that between states like Ohio, where police and insurers use a fault standard to determine who is responsible for a car accident, and Michigan, a ‘no fault’ state. Michigan lawmakers notwithstanding, Americans tend to focus on the issue of fault, seeking to get ‘inside the minds eye’ (*mens rea*) of those involved. This also helps account for the American focus on the personalities of the two

7. See Kaiping Peng, Daniel Ames and Eric Knowles, ‘Culture and human inference: perspectives from three traditions’, *Handbook of Cross-cultural Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Note that the very terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ (*Dong/Xi*) are only mutually exclusive categories in the Western mode of reasoning. ‘Easterners’ would be more likely to see the distinction between East and West as relative—not absolute. Cross-cultural psychologists do not use these terms to reify them as exclusive categories; instead, their experimental work quantifies differences of degree. Hence our uses of probabilistic phrases like ‘more likely’ and ‘tend to’.

8. To make things worse, there is no Chinese notion of ‘friendly competition’ akin to sportsmanship, instead, a ‘competitor’ is a rival to be vanquished.

pilots: the ‘hotshot maverick’ Wang Wei—‘China’s Tom Cruise’ [from *Top Gun*]⁹—and the stalwart Nebraskan Shane Osborn. Because Americans saw Wang and not Osborn as at fault, they would not apologize.

Chinese, by contrast, are more like Michigan lawmakers: they tend to have a more pragmatic, consequence-oriented view of responsibility. Regardless of who was at fault, a Chinese citizen is dead. A sincere American apology was therefore needed to restore the Sino–American relationship. Chinese were angered not so much by the accident itself as by the American refusal to apologize. Initial American declarations (from Bush to Powell and down the line) that America was ‘not responsible’—and demands for the return of the American crew—were seen as highly offensive. By refusing to apologize, America appeared extremely arrogant. In sum, an American focus on culpability clashed with a Chinese stress on consequences, exacerbating the resolution of an already difficult situation.

Cultural differences did, therefore, play a significant role in Sino–American apology diplomacy.

Cultural commonalties

But Chinese and American behaviors also exhibited a number of cultural commonalties. Social identity theory (SIT), the dominant approach to intergroup relations in social psychology today, has revealed that outgroups do not get the benefit of the doubt, and that ingroup members seek to maintain collective self-esteem. This work helps explain significant similarities in the Chinese and American responses to the incident: both blamed each other, and both sought to save face for their nations.

Social psychologists have found that humans consistently favor ingroups over outgroups when making attributions.⁹ Thus if an ingroup member does something good, we attribute it to his or her good disposition; however, if he or she does something bad, we write it off to the social situation beyond their control. This helps explain why Americans readily dismissed the 1999 embassy bombing as an ‘accident’. If a member of an outgroup does something good, conversely, we dismiss it as ‘luck’ or somehow attribute it to the situation (not reflecting well on the outgroup); if an outgroup member does something bad, however, it is surely due to his or her bad disposition, a disposition that has ramifications for the outgroup along with the individual. This helps explain why Chinese were equally quick to attribute the Belgrade bombing to American ‘hegemonism’.¹⁰ Out of a desire to view our ingroup as good, in short, we give our fellow ingroup members the benefit of the doubt; but we are not so charitable towards outsiders. Returning to the 2001 plane collision, because Chinese and Americans tend to view each other as outgroups, there was a strong tendency to ascribe hostile intent to ‘them’. Both

9. Thomas Pettigrew first called this phenomenon the ‘ultimate attribution error’; Miles Hewstone has more recently and modestly labeled it the ‘intergroup attribution bias’. See Thomas F. Pettigrew, ‘The ultimate attribution error: extending Allport’s cognitive analysis of prejudice’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 5(4), (1979), pp. 461–476; and Miles Hewstone, ‘The “ultimate attribution error”? A review of the literature on intergroup causal attribution’, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 20(4), (1990), pp. 311–335.

10. On the role of the intergroup attribution bias in the events of 1999, see Peter Hays Gries, ‘Tears of rage: Chinese nationalism and the Belgrade Embassy bombing’, *The China Journal*, No. 45, (July 2001) pp. 25–43.

sides thus argued that the Other had revealed its 'true nature', whether that be as an 'imperialist aggressor' or as a 'Communist tyrant'.

Social psychological research on collective self-esteem can also help us to better understand Chinese and American reactions to the plane accident. To the extent that we identify with a certain group, our self-esteem is tied to its fate. In one experiment, women who were shown a clip from an altered *Rocky IV*, in which the American boxer (played by Sylvester Stallone) lost to the Russian (rather than defeated him), were found to have lost national self-esteem.¹¹ Similarly, both Chinese and Americans viewed the events of early April as a threat to their self-esteem. In China, many nationalists perceived Bush's callousness towards the fate of Wang Wei as a humiliating loss of face. And in the conservative *Weekly Standard*, Robert Kagan and William Kristol similarly declared the Bush administration's handling of the affair 'A National Humiliation': Bush's 'groveling' was a degrading loss of face.¹² While the language of face may differ across cultures, it is clearly not a uniquely Oriental concern. Indeed, an obsession with national face may be the hallmark of parochial nationalists everywhere.

Some Chinese and Americans responded to their perceived threat to their national self-esteem by going into denial. Although the incident was clearly a disaster for the bilateral relationship, many nationalists on both sides quickly claimed victory—a clear sign of denial. In China, such self-deception is associated with the protagonist of Lu Xun's brilliant 1922 satire 'The True Story of Ah Q'. Ah Q, an illiterate and destitute Chinese peasant, is known for his 'psychological victory technique' (*jingshen shenglifa*) by which he maintains an inflated sense of himself.¹³ For instance, after being beaten up Ah Q often hits himself, fooling himself into thinking that he actually hit somebody else. Gloating that 'We won!' similarly allowed many Chinese and American Ah Qs to save face following the release of the American crew on 11 April. In Beijing, many boasted of how President Jiang had planned America's humiliation from the start, and had 'taught Bush Jr. a lesson'. In Washington, meanwhile, Bush was widely praised for having handled the situation masterfully, winning the day. *The Nelson Report* circulated a parody of the American 'we're sorry' letter: 'We're sorry the world is now seeing your leaders as the xenophobic, clueless thugs that they really are. We're sorry you are losing so much face over this'.¹⁴ Many in Beijing and Washington were indulging in face-saving self-deception.

Others responded to the threat to their self-esteem not with denial but by venting a rage designed to restore their self-respect. In the *Rocky IV* experiment mentioned above, psychologists discovered that their subjects' self-esteem was restored if they were subsequently allowed to denigrate Russians. The anger that many Chinese and

11. See Nyla R. Branscombe and Daniel L. Wann, 'Collective self-esteem consequences of outgroup derogation when a valued social identity is on trial', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 24(6), (November–December 1994), pp. 641–657.

12. Robert Kagan and William Kristol, 'A national humiliation', *The Weekly Standard*, (16–23 April 2001), pp. 11–16.

13. For a fascinating analysis, see Lu Junhua, *Lun Ah Q jingshen shenglifa de zheli he xinli neihan* [On the Philosophical and Psychological Meaning of Ah Q's Psychological Victory Technique] (Xian: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1982).

14. 'Apology to China', *The Nelson Report*, (April 2001). Our thanks to Rick Baum for this reference.

Americans displayed towards one another following the plane collision similarly sought to restore national self-esteem—to ‘save face’. For instance, by publicly calling Bush a ‘coward’ (in a letter from Wang Wei’s wife), Beijing sought to gain face for China at Washington’s expense. And with the release of the American crew, American hawks quickly began screaming for vengeance. Kagan and Krsitol, for example, demanded that ‘China must now pay a price’.

While such America-bashing and China-bashing may be emotionally gratifying, it is extremely dangerous. Psychologist Herbert Kelman, who has written extensively about Israeli–Palestinian relations, argues that national identities can become locked into a state of ‘negative interdependence’, where ‘each perceives the very existence of the other ... to be a threat’. Israelis and Palestinians, in Kelman’s view, engage in a zero-sum battle over identity. Such ‘existential conflict’ involves a systematic effort to delegitimize the other by defining ‘them’ in morally unacceptable ways. Palestinians, for instance, depict Zionism as ‘racism’, while Israelis label the PLO as ‘terrorist’: the demonization of the Other excludes Them from the moral community of humanity.¹⁵

Seeking to save face, many Chinese and Americans are similarly demonizing each other as ‘thugs’ and ‘bullies’. In China, ‘say “no”!’ nationalists lambaste America as aggressive and arrogant; and on Capitol Hill, a ‘Blue Team’ of conservative China-bashers loudly decry the ‘China threat’. There is a real danger inherent in such polemics: a Sino–American relationship devoid of mutual trust becomes a volatile powder keg. Once ‘they’ cease to be human, the psychological foundation for violence is laid.

The assumption that cultures are so different that we cannot understand one another is, therefore, extremely pernicious. There is much in our hearts and minds that we all, as human beings, share. But Chinese and American policy makers and pundits do need to be aware of cultural differences. In this case, they needed the open mindedness to try to understand not just what an apology meant in their own cultures, but also what it meant on the other side of the Pacific. We must, in other words, learn to embrace both our cultural differences and our common humanity. If we can learn this lesson, Wang Wei may not have died in vain.

15. Herbert C. Kelman, ‘The interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian national identities: the role of the Other in existential conflicts’, *Journal of Social Issues* 55(3), (Fall 1999), pp. 588, 591.