Rising China’s Regional Policy in East Asia:

A Constructivist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

If China’s economic and military capabilities were to exceed those of the US, China would have great influence in the region and even might become the regional leader. Realists and liberals presume that the state’s intention and interest is given and do not investigate the intention, identity and culture of the state and its development, thus weakening its strength of explanation.

From a constructivist perspective, the national identity and interest can be changeable. The culture of anarchical structure can also be changed. It means that China has a possibility to rise peacefully and become the regional leader by peaceful means if China and the other countries can construct China’s national identity as a responsible great power.

I apply constructivism to explain the uniqueness of China’s national identity and culture, how China’s national identity has been constructed, the interactive process between China and other regional states, how China and other East Asian countries cultivate more friendship and cooperation and how China can become the driving force to promote a regional cooperation process.

Besides applying the existing constructivist theory to China’s case, I also try to develop the theory.

First, though constructivism emphasizes national identity, it does not pay enough attention to the mentality and psychology of the people. I fill in this gap by putting forward how China can reflect on her Middle Kingdom mentality and victim psychology and putting forward a new point that China should construct a “great power mentality” and “global power mentality” in advance before a great power and global power can come into being. “Great power” mentality is based on the confidence and awareness of its own strong points and weaknesses. The people with “great power” mentality are not too sensitive about comments or criticisms from other countries and do not inappropriately react to the criticisms with victim psychology or irrational emotion. A nation with “great power” mentality is not only responsible for her domestic people, but also responsible for international society.

Second, constructivists usually focus more on how the structure constructs agent, but do not pay enough attention to how the agent constructs structure. I fill in this gap by arguing that China is not passively constructed by the structure, but she is also trying to construct the structure by putting forward some norms and values.

Third, constructivism argues that the culture of structure can be changed from Hobbesian culture to Lockean culture and to Kantian culture, but it does not fully discuss how to promote the change and where the driving force is. I fill in this gap by suggesting that the state is the most important driving force. The change of the culture of structure in Sino-Japanese relations is also possible even if only one side (China) takes the initiative to cultivate more friendship.

Fourth, constructivism does not pay enough attention to how the domestic factors
affect the interest and behaviors of states. Actually, international political agents are subject to systemic, regional, domestic, bureaucratic and micro-interactional structures. I try to fill in this gap by investigating the domestic factors of China and discuss how the leaders and scholars affect China’s regional policy.

In the future, China may not be strong enough to become a benign regional leader regardless of the aspects of hard power and soft power. However, a constructivist perspective can provide directions for China’s construction of a benign leader image.

I argue that it is possible for China to become the regional leader peacefully if China can do a good job in the following areas. First, China can sincerely reflect on Middle Kingdom mentality, its victim psychology and construct great power mentality. The process should be firstly driven by insightful political elites. Second, China can construct a regional identity by drawing from the strong points of Confucius, Mencius, western values and Buddhism. Third, China can improve its soft power, not only by learning the strong points of soft power from its forefathers, but also from that of the US. Fourth, China can embrace the US in a regional cooperation framework and cooperate with the US to construct a regional identity and soft power including the strong points of the US. Fifth, the US, Japan and the ASEAN can continue to socialize China into the international system.
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