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## **Political Ritual and Solidarity in China: A Preliminary Review**

### **Introduction**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese monarchy that lasted for over two thousand years was terminated by the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. However, the revolution didn't manage to lead Chinese people to an era of re-unification but rather a period of chaos with warlords ravaging across the land of China. As criticized by Sun Yat-sen, who is later considered as the "Father of the Nation" of China, China, and Chinese society in particular, is more like a "sheet of loose sand" for Chinese people's loyalty to families and clans instead of China as a nation (Whyte 1). In other words, Chinese society in 1910s-20s can be concluded predominantly by the fact of lacking social cohesion. However, this status was changed dramatically since the late 1930s. Due to the invasion of Japan, different political factions of China agreed upon the establishment of a united front to fight against their common enemy. In the following years of Sino-Japanese War, the appeal of united front dramatically enhanced the unity among Chinese people. Nevertheless, when the war was ended, "other" as the criterion for the affirmation of Chinese nationality was exhausted. Merely within few years, the Civil War between the Chinese Communist Party, the CCP, and

the Chinese Nationalist Party, the KMT, broke out, casting shadow to the unification of Chinese nationhood.

Till this point, we can easily perceive the fact that Chinese society was so divided by political factions in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, not to mention other factors like classes that further contribute to the heterogeneity and internal conflicts among the people. Nevertheless, we can also extract a fact from the historic material that a strong bond can be perceived within the society after CCP's victory and the subsequent nationwide socialist reform. In movements like Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, large amount of citizens voluntarily devote into tasks that aimed at fulfilling a shared objective. Certainly, there were incidents took place in between these two periods that consolidate the unity within Chinese society.

In the past decades, efforts had been made by scholars within and outside China to reveal the myth of Chinese society in terms of how it is tightly connected and functioned. According to Martin K. Whyte, a perspective of analysis is to consider the effect of political ritual that is carried out through "*hsiao-tsu*", or "*xiaozu (小组)*", which stands for small group. Whyte points out that most Chinese citizens in 1950s-60s were affiliated to a specific small group which was normally composed of a handful amount of members. Within the group, apart from daily works, members also meet for political study together on a regular basis to not only study the assigned materials but also to engage in mutual criticism or self-crticism, "*piping yu ziwo piping (批评与自我批评)*" (Whyte 2-4). Through the practice in small groups as political ritual, individuals would modify and thus align their attitude as well as conduct to the ideal version stressed on the study material, enhancing one's conformity to the authority(Whyte 4). Indeed, looking back to the period of Cultural

Revolution, that Whyte viewed as a peak of group study activity, a voluntary procedure called “ask in the morning, report in the night”, or “*zao qingshi, wan huibao* (早请示、晚汇报)” was so wide-spread among Chinese citizens. This procedure means that an individual would self-willingly ask for permission to “Mao Zedong” for one’s plan in a day in the morning and report to “Mao Zedong” in the night with a summary of conduct in the day. These examples reveal the trend that the social cohesion in Chinese society at the time was consolidated through enhancing individual’s conformity to the authority based on a given criterion, which is practiced through small group study as a form of political ritual.

Therefore, Whyte’s study offers me a clue that ritual, or political ritual in particular, might be a key factor that can contribute to social cohesion through various processes. However, a flaw in Whyte’s discussion on political ritual is that he employed a simplistic conception on ritual as a summary of the activities that take place in the small group (Whyte 4-6). As Steven Lukes criticized, “the neo-Durkheimian claims on the role of political ritual are often the deficient analysis, influenced by normative functionalism, on value integration and failed to thoroughly interpret how it holds society together” (296-297). However, it is certainly inappropriate to connect Whyte’s works with this criticism in a similarly simplistic way, but it indeed offers me the motivation to critically re-examine Whyte’s efforts as well as the other existing paradigms upon the account of “how society is held together”, especially in China.

Subsequently, I would like to conduct a preliminary review on the existing literatures that analyze the function of ritual, and its representation in China, with my categorization on different sets of theoretical frameworks. I will begin with a detailed analysis on the conceptions of social cohesion and integration, or solidarity to certain extent, and the

function of ritual that ought to serve as the fundamental knowledge for any further study. Then, I will proceed to discuss the contribution and deficiency of other existing intellectual works as well as my suggestion to how they might be adjusted or incorporated with other methodological approaches. Finally, I will connect conclude all these works with the account on how future efforts can be devoted with paradigmatic innovation and thus be utilized in the study of China not only in the past but also in presence.

## **Ritual and Solidarity: A Durkheimian Approach**

Upon the study of social integration and cohesion, or solidarity in general, it is necessary to consult the theoretical framework developed by Emile Durkheim. In Durkheim's theory, solidarity, the focus of his analysis, refers to the degree of cohesion, as the sense of being connected, among individuals in a given society (Durkheim, Division of Labor 37). Empirically, the phenomenon of the sense of connection exists in most regions as people always tend to associate themselves with the others, which is considered as the natural inclination of human as social animal. From clan to urban space, or to a nation-state, people would identify themselves based on some given criteria as thus connect to each other based on homogeneity under self-identification. Thus, Durkheim recognized solidarity as a "essential condition of social life", guaranteeing the "existence, development, and persistence of societies" (Durkheim, Division of Labor 120). Durkheim categorized two types of solidarity: mechanical solidarity and organic one. Respectively, mechanical solidarity exists when "collective conscience completely envelops [people's] whole conscience and coincides in all points with it", while organic solidarity exists when the collective consciousness, as the foundation for solidarity, is undermined by differentiation

within the society and is thus replaced by the mutual dependence among individuals (Durkheim, Division of Labor 40, 92). In other words, mechanical solidarity is characterized by homogeneity of the people that are associated with a given community while further emphasized through division of labor and organic solidarity is characterized by heterogeneity whereas people are more depended on each other based on variation of skills and expertise that can be represented by a more sophisticated version of division of labor. Durkheim believed that with the complex nature of modernity, compared to pre-modern society, traditional mechanical solidarity will gradually be replaced by organic one, driven by the evolution viewed from division of labor (Durkheim, Division of Labor, 12).

However, Durkheim's prediction over the transition of solidarity might be inaccurate at present days. Even based on our previous brief discussion on China's social fact, it's easy to apprehend a reality of high degree of homogeneity under the socialist principles. Thus, mechanical solidarity and strong collective consciousness might still have their place in modern and contemporary society. Also, as to clarify, on the use of terms "modern" and "contemporary", I do not intend to imply a postmodernism narrative but rather a straightforward delineation of the history upon pre-reform and post-reform communist China, which is marked by the dramatic economic, political, and social changes induced by Deng Xiaoping's reform agenda since 1978. Return to Durkheim's theory, the partial rejection to his prediction also does not indicate the invalidity of his account on social structure. By preliminarily affirming the fact of homogeneity in Chinese society, we can on the other hand stress the significance of Durkheim's approach to the analysis of collective consciousness and thus employ it in the study of China's case, especially how individual homogeneity can be placed in a social context.

One particular mechanism that Durkheim analyzed as the way to strengthen collective consciousness and thereby mechanical solidarity is ritual, or religious ritual specifically. Through an anthropological study on the religious phenomenon of primitive societies across regions like Australia, Durkheim proposed “ritual (rite)” as a mode of actions, with an object that is characterized in prior, to declare one’s conformity to a prescription of conduct (Durkheim, *Religious Life* 38). Durkheim described the “object” based on belief, another fundamental religious phenomenon, that it dichotomic classification between real and ideal, or profane and sacred, and thus affirmed the nature of ritual as to follow the sacredness and its projection in human behaviors according to the belief ( *Religious Life* 34-38). In practice, ritual takes place as ceremony with various forms but centers on a common mean that people gather together with the “first step to reaffirm to one another this quality that they ascribe to themselves and by which they define themselves” (Durkheim, *Religious Life* 362). Through such ceremonies, a purpose for reproducing the “totemic species”, or the object of belief, “haunts the minds of faithful” and is further reinforced by people’s outward actions of imitation on those objects, like animals or plants in primitive religion(Durkheim, *Religious Life* 362-363). Durkheim then assessed on ritual activity with this influential account:

“Through this rite (ritual), the group periodically revitalizes the sense it has of itself and its unity [...]. The glorious memories that are made to live again before their eyes, and with which they feel in accord, bring about a feeling of strength and confidence. One is more sure in one's faith when one sees how far into the past it goes and what great things it has inspired.” (Durkheim, *Religious Life* 379)

Therefore, we can then reach a conclusion on ritual and solidarity through Durkheimian approach. Solidarity is the evaluation on to what degree people subjectively sense the connection with others. Functionalist statement then indicates such awareness of being connected lead to social integration as a foundation for collective actions. Durkheim implied that it is the social fact of division of labor as well as the collective consciousness constituted the sentiment of solidarity, especially in a mechanical form. Ritual, on the other hand, and the ceremonial practice, brings people to the recognition of symbolic value of their belief together at a shared while imagined space where individuals affirm their affiliation, with each other, to such belief, which subsequently project the necessity for individuals to align with the prescriptions of belief in terms of behavior. That being said, individuals who are affiliated to a belief would be more likely to perform in the ways how belief delineated the sacredness, confronting the opposing notion of profane, as a fundamental principle of religious belief.

Then, as to discuss the definition of political ritual, I will extend my critique on Whyte's paradigmatic track and propose my own interpretation on the conception of political ritual. As we review Whyte's words, political ritual is used primarily as the reference to "organized political study, mutual criticism, and related activities carried on in [*xiaozu*]" (3). In other words, Whyte's attempt on conception is to summarize the other activities instead of understanding "political ritual" per se. Without the interpretation to the nature of political ritual, it would be hard for us to utilize Whyte's contribution as well as some related works to a boarder sense. Therefore, if we look back into the mean of ritual as its nature in the study of social structure, structural-functionalists, inspired by Durkheim, like

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Claude Levi-Strauss tends to associate ritual's function in the production as well as the reproduction of belief for maintain social order and its effect as the prescription of behavior of individuals with how ritual practice is institutionalized among the people (Radcliffe-Brown 173, Levi-Strauss 58-59). In Steven Lukes's ideas, for a ritual to be political, it should comply with a political paradigm for how ritual as a rule-governed mechanism is functioned in social structure as to modify people's collective consciousness (Lukes 301). In turn, the sacred religious belief and its normative function emphasized in Durkheim's account on religious ritual might need to be modified for adapting a political agenda. So, as for the conception of political ritual, I suggest that it shall be defined as: the rule-governed activity that assembles affiliated individuals to reaffirm their conformity to a series of specific normative principles that is proposed by a specific political organ, and thus to reinforce the collective consciousness of the individuals that would ultimately consolidate solidarity.

With this conception on political ritual above, I'm now moving on to elaborate upon literatures that focus on the study of how political ritual contribute to the solidarity within a modern or contemporary society, particularly in China.

## **Political Ritual as Governmentality**

As mentioned, ritual's features of rule-governed and normative effect are two dimensions that define the nature of ritual. Political ritual, thereby, indicates that both of these features are to certain extent relate to the intension of political dynamics. The practice of political ritual, or the values that it tends to convey, shall then reflect the objectives of the authority. In Michel Foucault's writings, he proposed the thoughts on how



discipline is, through power relation, installed in the society. One particular mechanism for such function is through the process of normalization as to classify the people by setting up a model of normality and thus encourages affinity to the normality, which would ultimately homogenize the people into docility (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 178-184). Foucault then linked this coercive disciplinary mechanism to the idea of *raison d'état*, reason of the state or national interest. This thesis provided a paradigm to comprehend political actions based on the political reason from the side of ruling organs, which in modern society is the implementation of governmentality for enforcing conformity from the grassroot to the authority (Foucault, *Security*, 355-356). Moreover, Louis Althusser, a notable Marxist philosopher, also argued that ritual exists as a type of ideological state apparatus that functions to maintain while reproducing the ideology claimed by ruling class and can be found in various channels including media and education (Althusser 107-109). Therefore, for this section, I will introduce a series of works that tend to connect political ritual which is perceived as disciplinary mechanism that is initiated from political authority, a unique form of political organ that is normally perceived as the ruling regime, both theoretically and empirically with examples in China.

If we simultaneously utilize the wisdom of Foucault and Althusser, we can obtain the knowledge would be filled into Whyte's analysis on small group and political study. Political ritual since modern China managed to penetrate into the very basic units of social structure and project the image of authority exactly to the individual citizens. This narrative contains two dimensions: demographic concern and normative concern. As for demonography, a key aspect of traditional Chinese society was the difficulty of grassroot governance. Many voices had argued in the past that Chinese imperial authority doesn't

touch upon the county-level, “*huangquan bu xiaxian* (皇权不下县)”. Although it has been proved in certain way as an invalid assertion for the appearance of county-level administrative organs under Chinese monarchy, the efficiency of such bureaucracy is indeed questionable despite its mere existence (Zhou, Historical Roots 98-99). Hence, small group was managed to resolve this concern as the party-state deliberately assigned individuals to a group in their workplace, removing the very first obstacle for ritual practice (Whyte 10). This precondition is further reflected when the party-state was dealing with the normative concern. According to Foucault, the increasing social mobility in the population allowed the people to tie with each other on their will and this raised alert for how issues like self-identification and social integration can be achieved with ruling party’s aim, leading to the innovation of governmentality as to infiltrate the population (Foucault, Security 314). Thus, apart from authority’s assignment of small group, the social mobility in employment is also restricted with household registration policy, or “*hukou* (户口)”, diminishing the potentiality of the natural internal bonds of the population.

With all these preparations, political ritual as group study is then ensured with sufficient physical and mental space. As organized either by administration or later more voluntarily during the Cultural Revolution, individuals engage in the small group activities to affirm their affiliation to the party-state from all aspects of live. In detail, the idea of “three loyalty”, or “*san zhongyu* (三忠于)”, was considered as the normative principles that stressed on the model of normality and also encouraged at official level. This idea is explained as being loyal to chairman Mao Zedong, to Maoism, and to Maoist revolution

track. It indicates the attempt of the political authority's aim in cultivating conformity in the population to the values of government as the collective conscience.

However, small group and political study still bears inadequacy in how political rituals exist in daily lives of Chinese citizens. Beyond the small group, as Huaiyin Li mentioned in his works, the political authority also divided the population, mostly workers, into three categories: "activists", or "*jiji fenzi* (积极分子)", ordinary workers, and "backward elements", or "*luohou fenzi* (落后分子)" (Li 30-31). Among the activists, they were likely to be awarded as "model labor". In many cases, workplaces might also set up ceremony to award these selected individuals and encourage the others to learn from them. It shares the feature of mutual-criticism and self-criticism that took place in small group political study as to both declare one's affiliation to a community and the motivation for normalization in align with the normalized values asserted by authority.

Thus, both Whyte and Li's empirical account on the lives in workplace in pre-reform China helps us to comprehend how the theoretical understanding of political ritual as governmentality can be reflected in reality. However, a key takeaway from these case studies is that they predominantly focus on the social dynamics of pre-reform China while no other major works had been done to examine how similar mechanism might exist in contemporary China. For instance, the awarding ceremony, or "*biaozhang dahui* (表彰大会)" still has its place in presence, especially in COVID era for mentioning the model figures against pandemic or who represents an extraordinary moral standard as in "Touching China", or "*gandong zhongguo* (感动中国)". Moreover, study groups on party's history and theories, as well as Xi Jinping's ideas are also emerging in schools and workplace, bearing

similar features to the political study in Maoist era. Therefore, collective consciousness of the homogeneity based on the pursuit of normality and the solidarity it contributes to shall be analyzed with new approach.

## **Solidarity and Mobilization**

In addition to the governmentality theories, political ritual can also exist in other forms with different mechanism. From the previous analysis, we can see that political ritual in many cases depicts the will of ruling authority for enforcing homogenous conformity to attested values as the base of solidarity. However, as David Kertzer contested, the involvement in the ritual practice expresses one's social dependence so that the key aspect of ritual is about common participation and collectively shared sentiments, rather than the other attempts of rationalization on the ritual mechanism (Kertzer 67-68). Therefore, for the study of political ritual, Kertzer suggested that how the bonds among citizens are produced from the political rituals carried out by political organizations shall be the focus of analysis instead of uniformity in belief which in turn is not necessary for the political ritual (Kertzer 68). In other words, by retreating to the starting point of ritual, as elaborated by Durkheim, the emphasis of Kertzer is the point when one is reaffirming the affiliation, or self-identification, to a specific group, which is proceeded with the interaction with commonly upheld belief. Therefore, with this principle, we can discover the missing segment of governmentality thesis that centers on how people interact with belief homogenously, which is, for instance, what might be the effect for one to step into a room of study or the gate of a church. Among all, Kertzer also implied that political ritual would thus also be a direct source of solidarity in the times of social changes for it exhibit through

what mechanism a society is capable in re-introducing solidarity (65-66). With these accounts, we can then move on to a new set of studies upon how political ritual displays its effect through individual's participation instead of an imposed common value, which can be largely attribute to the mobilization mechanism in governance.

For the underlying logic of participation in ritual, I would like to introduce Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical analysis on habitus, which he defined as systems of durable that imply an end of social interactions (Bourdieu 53). From Bourdieu's work, we can see that habitus has an implicit structural indication coin on the fact that people internalize the possibility of actions to an upheld intrinsic value, which can be shared homogenously by others who conduct similar habitus (Bourdieu 52-56). In reality, we can firstly enter the ground where the intrinsic effect of habitus would occur in the most obvious direction, the point of social change. As Joel Andreas evaluated on the effect of economic reform of China upon factory workers, a major phenomenon that can be perceived in daily interaction is that workers are now less willingly to declare their identity as worker since they don't feel proud of such identification due their status of being disenfranchised from the collective ownership of factories (218). Traditionally, in the pre-reform era, workers have the right to decide on the affairs of production collectively based on their "industrial citizenship" and thus exhibiting high degree of loyalty to their identity as well as motivations in self-mobilization as a group (Andreas 217-218). With this case, we can see that the workplaces, or work units as "*danwei* (单位)", of China used to enfranchise the workers through offering their channel to represent themselves in the related affairs of worker community. Getting involved in the discourse of factory, and more importantly, the worker community generated the sense of belonging among individuals. Namely, collective affirmation on

their affiliation to a worker community with a given work unit, which is administrated by the party state, was in the past represent the shared sentiment of solidarity that is reproduced through habitus of “industrial civil engagement”. However, such sentiment is then greatly diminished since age of reform, signaling a changing status of solidarity in Chinese society, particularly among workers.

From the case of industrial citizenship in work units, we can approach to a key claim that solidarity based on individual’s subjective sense of affiliation can be reinforced through constant while repetitive behavior of ritual involvement. In an institutionalism perspective, such involvement might retain some correspondence with authority, or domination from the idea of *Herrschaft*. Based on the works developed by Chinese academia, scholars like Xueguang Zhou and Shizheng Feng adopted a Weberian framework to analyze how authority acts to enforce its legitimacy through mass mobilization, as the national campaign (Zhou, Authoritarian State 76-77; Feng 73-74). In detail, Feng stated that the pre-reform China, as revolutionary indoctrination regime, that was built upon the charismatic legitimacy tended to reproduce legitimacy through social reform program that would match the revolutionary characteristics of the ruling party’s ideology (77-78). Thus, by this assertion, we can consider mobilization with ritual feature which means that authority tends to mobilize citizens based on its intention in social reform and citizens affirm their loyalty, not necessarily in all aspects but even merely in formalist conduct, to the legitimacy of party-state. Consequently, mobilization bears similarity in practice as ordinary forms of habitus since people would internalize the values of participating in repetitive programs. In contemporary China, such phenomenon also exists like to recite the 12 core socialist values, or “shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan (社会主义核心价值观)”. Without

comprehending the indication of these values, by getting mobilized and participate in the practice of recitation would force people internally to conform with the authority of party-state while also sharing linkage with others who are influenced by this social reform program.

In this section, I offer a review on how mobilization as an institutional mechanism is employed with ritual feature in China to enforce solidarity. Fundamentally, participation and mostly importantly constant repetitive participation exhibits the function as habitus that would internalize conformity to a collective sentiment of identity affiliation as well as the recognition of authority. Nevertheless, this set of analysis is still trapped in the focus on power relation, especially when it comes to macro-level. The power relation narrative here drives the focus of analysis deep into how solidarity is implemented with dependence on the object of ritual, the political values or authority in the sense of political ritual. Thereby, these literatures basically neglect how assembling people in a shared physical or mental space would help create bonds among themselves and what factors might further assist such horizontal cohesion.

## **Conclusion**

Derived from the previous discussion, we can now reach a conclusion on the initial question of “how society is held together”, particularly in China, through political ritual. In short, I employ a Durkheimian approach to thoroughly examine the correlation between ritual conduct and solidarity, which offers me the idea that individuals reaffirm their affiliation to a given community while reproduce their tendency in conformity to the norms, or belief, commonly upheld by this community. Therefore, ritual provides the

ground to induce collective consciousness upon the homogeneous features among individuals. Thus, by taking into the account of how political authority would act upon the norms exhibited through rituals, we then see two tracks, governmentality and mobilization theories, of how this specific form of ritual, a political one, can contribute to the solidarity in society with examples from China.

For each of the track, it can be perceived as supplementary to the other if we separate the mechanism of ritual based on Durkheim's conception on its exact format of actions, reaffirmation on collective identity in the first and attachment to the normative belief afterwards. However, theoretically, a focus on the demonstration ritual's nature per se in real life might still lead us to the unawareness of other angles in the analysis of ritual as mechanism. That been said, how might the efficacy vary among differentiated practices of political ritual could be insufficient by merely looking into the interaction of power.

Moreover, factors like language, as elaborated by scholars like Benedict Anderson, shall be regarded as the catalyst for the reproduction of the notion on collective identity in a shared while imagined space where ultimately would strengthen the collective consciousness of all associated individuals in a given community (Anderson , 37). However, an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to connect all these studies and perspectives is yet to be established. It can be attribute to the fact that political ritual is yet to become a focus of the academia for its excessive emphasis on the interdisciplinary paradigm even among the existing literatures. In addition, the academia is also lack of the empirical quantitative or qualitative studies that are directly associated with the inquiry upon ritual theories. Therefore, there can be a spatial ground for whom with interest in this topic to further discover its myth.



Apart from the suggested direction on the future theoretical works, I would also like to share my thoughts on the existing empirical studies not just relate to political ritual, but the political dynamics in general of China. With the literatures I've included previously, we can see that they predominantly focus on the cases of pre-reform China as well as the comparative studies between pre-reform China and post-reform China from 1978 to early 2000s. Thus, I point out that there's high demand on the review of more recent development of political dynamics and political ritual. As I've discussed above, at both micro and macro levels, China since Xi Jinping's inauguration had changed dramatically to what was considered as technocracy in the early reform era (Cheng and White, 2-3). Meanwhile, political ritual in particular at certain perspectives bear lots of similarity to the pre-reform period, like the political study program with advertised institutional personal cult upon Xi. In the recent years, a movement as Youth Study, or "*qingnian daxuexi* (青年大学习)", further reflected what was examined by Martin Whyte decades ago as the way to enforce solidarity under the principle to strengthen collective consciousness relates to the party-state. In summary, same as the need in theoretical innovation, there is also an urgent necessity to identify the subjects of study for comprehending the new social structure and thus solidarity within China. With the help of theories, we might also have the channel to employ this "China Model" to where beyond this community.

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