

REVIEW AND PROSPECT: CONDITION AND RESEARCH OF CHINESE POLITICAL CULTURE

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I would like to analyze Chinese political culture. Maybe my presentation will be quite general and introductory, so I hope it's helpful and informative for you to have a brief picture on Chinese political culture nowadays. So I will focus on current research on the Chinese political culture in China after reform.

Two very important concepts in political science research, political culture and civic culture, were brought into China quite early in the reform of Chinese institutions. The 1980s may seem rather late, almost thirty years later the publishing of the *Civic Culture*. But it's relatively early for China, because the Chinese reform started in the 1970s. Several years after reform, the book was translated into Chinese and it contributed a lot to the development of Chinese political study in our academic community.

So I would like to say something about the background of the political culture issues in China. There is a stereotype of Chinese political culture: so-called passive, obedient, supportive in pre-modern time. That is a very important portrait of Chinese people, how Chinese people regard the regime and their political lives. The Communist Party took power in 1949; and it tried to re-shape or re-build a so-called socialist new man; attempting to change not only the society, but also people's mentality. Moreover, there was high participation and high loyalty to the party State, and those are endless ideology struggles.

So the Chinese reform started in the late 1970s. The political reform and also the market economy brought a huge change for the Chinese social-economic environment. We can also see a fundamental change in Chinese political culture, from class struggle to more pragmatism, and also developmentalism. So I do not want to talk too much about the class struggle, Marxism, but to talk more about the economic development, the promotion of living standards, and also developmentalism. This idea is shared both by the

elite and the masses. For national development, we can sacrifice all freedom or liberty or even democracy for the national economic social development. So it's quite developmentalist. Political culture is a very important concept to study, whether it was adapted by the radical social economic transition since 1949, or it can shape itself in a form that is suitable for future democracy.

In the developed West, the civic culture or the verbal culture is important because it is linked to a healthy and sustainable democracy. In China, maybe it is important because it is supposed to be able to explain political change, predict political future, and shape political change in China.

According to the research on Chinese political culture, we can see three different visions different from the stereotypical view. The first one is, people say that Chinese political culture is found to be opposed to democratization. For example: is it passive, and is it a weak participation culture? Of course, in China we can see a very weak participation culture; and also high trust in government and high legitimacy, and a solid national identity. For this culture, democracy is not welcome, not necessary, and even not possible; because we have this, such kind of culture. These are the conclusions of classic work inspired by Marx, and of Lucian Pye (1990) and the World Bank, based on documentary resources, and interviews, and the field observation.

The second vision on Chinese political culture is: is it more active?, Chinese people are more active than previously expected the values Chinese and Asian peoples. There's a book by Andrew Nathan and Shi (1997); and there are some surveys that show that there is a relatively strong desire for participation, and a high vote turnout for Chinese people, even for poor peasants. Also there is high popular support for government, even in the capital city of Beijing. This research is more thorough, it is of samples surveys and interviews, so that's supposed to be more consolidated.

The sub-vision which I can see is: it depends on differentiation. So the Chinese are ready to welcome democracy or perceive democracy; but in a different way than the West. But that does not necessarily mean the recognizing of democracy will necessarily result in democratization. And also there is some research which shows that trust in government is high, even for Chinese peasants. Usually, the Chinese people look up to their leadership; essential thinking that it is very kind, and magnificent. But they distrust leaders closer to the grass-roots. We need more detailed research to show how political trust has changed. So it depends on differentiating, and also there are some subcultures.

So we can see three different visions of Chinese political culture. Is there any problem or difficulty for current political science, political culture research? As far as I understand, there are some problems for the research nowadays. The first is a low capacity to explain political process. So you may say political culture is important. But sometimes it is very hard to explain the current situation or change or transition of political system in China. For example if you say: political trust and support are so high, as showed in the survey, why is there tension and conflict growing which can upset Chinese authority? People also protest and complain to the upper levels government. So they pay much attention to the social tension. People usually don't argue with the lower levels of government, because they understand cannot meet their demands The upper level government has the decision making power. So they do not argue with the grass-roots. So the proper thing to do is go to Beijing. If the political trust support is so high, I think Chinese leaders can sleep. For example in the national day, the first of October, it's pretty intense, and the local governments try a lot to control the situation and to retain people who wish to go to Beijing. So it's a great, a difficult job for the local governments.

So, you see, if Chinese people are unhappy about the Chinese government, why is current Chinese leader, Hu Jintao, so highly respected? Why such a high turnout in grass root election, about 90 percent or 95 percent? Patriotism is reaching a historical high. It's hard to explain with the survey research. And also, if current Chinese culture is more or less a kind of civic culture, why is there radical nationalism coming on the internet? Moreover, the middle class shows no interest in public affairs, and the degree of tolerance among Chinese people is relatively low, especially to conflict. It's hard to explain the reality with our current research. Sometimes the interpretative research and the survey research can be misleading. For example, I would like to make example from my daughter. She is attending second year of public school at New York, where she has a social study course. The course is: "How do you define the government?" To ask to her: "What do you think about government?" She says: "Government is the people control of the power". But the definition here, in the United States: "The government is a group of people who run the city, the country, and the community". Conversely, in the text book, the communist ideology teaches Chinese kids: "You are the most of the nation". What I mean is that it is a gap between the text book and the learning from the everyday life.

So that may be a surprise: two kinds of political cultures, something is on the text, but quite different from what really works in our everyday political

life; even different from constitution. So, if our research depends too much on the written texts, research may not be productive. In surveys, when we are using some common Western concept in survey, there are not only language gaps between the research and reality, because the regional context is so different that the concept of for example democracy and politics, they are understood in another way. Some political terms, like democracy, have been utilized by authorities as a symbol. It has a different meaning than in the West. So, if you ask directly: “What do you think about democracy and leader support?” we need to not only translate, literally, but also we should interpret our question into the local context, on the culture, and so not only language. And also there’s a non-measurable issue: whether political culture is independent variable for political development or just a result of rational choice. So we can see the picture was quite blurred. Sometimes, political culture is a result of the institutional and organizational setting or background. Therefore, research results are not systematic enough to provide a suggestion for democratization, even for stability of China.

I would like to divide the Chinese culture into three levels: the high political culture, and the medium political culture, and the low political culture. So, high political culture means pride in nation, nationality, and so on. Medium political culture is related to policies related to personal interest. This relates to the role of government, the limitation of the government, how about the government policy priorities? And there is also a kind of a low political culture which is the base of the whole political culture system. It’s a political culture based on people’s behavior. So, it shows in everyday life of citizens and people’s basic political beliefs.

Table 1. Three levels of Chinese political culture

High political culture (国家大事)	Pride in a nation National identity Legitimacy of government Principles of government
Medium political culture (有切身利益的政策)	Role of government Government policy priorities
Low political culture (体在行中的政治文化)	Role of citizens People’s basic political beliefs

So when we ask the question for the three levels of political culture. For the high and medium political culture, it is quite important to shape political types of elites. But, because official documents always hide real politics behind the statements, Chinese ordinary people, can only read it in a very

superficial ways. So, one of my colleagues in Europe said: “Your Party statements, from Party congress, just nonsense. So, we don’t understand what they say”. But they try to hide the real politics behind the curtain. Ordinary people just take it as a doctrine or rhetoric, without really reflecting on it. So, when we ask the question “Do you love the country?” or the leadership of the Party, and so on. Maybe they answer the question in a not very serious way.

And there is also a dividing mode in political trust and the legitimacy for Chinese people. Chinese people respect a legitimate authority, but sometimes they can divide the legitimacy of an authority from the leadership of the country, even from the Party; and also they can divide the central leadership from the local leadership. So, if they say “I support the authority”, that does not necessarily mean they support the local government, even may not mean they support the current leadership. That does not mean, of course, they support the Party, or the legitimacy authority of the State. The political culture of a nation is not only based on the literature, political ideology, but also on real social political life. Personal experience is much more influential than a text book. Participation in China is heavily mobilized by the Party and the government, so sometimes participation with a high turnout maybe just a fake participation. I reach my conclusion. For a successful democratic transformation, to upturn political reform, social economic changes are not enough. So, political culture transition should be highly considered. And also the social economic transition may result in political culture change, but not directly. Organized, everyday life is helpful to foster democratic culture in China. So, for research, the survey is still a fundamental method, but it needs to be combined with case studies. And participatory observation will be critical to determine what question should be asked and how to ask it.

REFERENCES

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