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Possibilities of Discursive Legitimacy in
Contemporary China**

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Abstract

Domestic political legitimacy has attracted the attention of many scholars after China adopted the policies of reform and opening up in 1978. The Weberian top-down approach has been a dominant framework in the literature to conceptualize political legitimacy with the electoral representative democratic political system as the model. This paper takes a constructivist approach bringing the dynamic and discursive relationship between the ruled and the ruling elites as the main axis of theorizing political legitimacy in China. Although the relationship between the two is unequal, the former exercises agency in a discursive context in an authoritarian political system.

The approaches based on the Weberian framework emphasize economic performance, factional politics, and coercion to explain the continuing legitimacy of the Communist Party of China. Whereas the increasing use of ideas, practices, and symbols from traditional Chinese culture is considered an identity politics in terms of the mobilization of nationalism to make up for lack of political legitimacy. But in theoretical terms, they find it difficult to conceptualize the significance of the traditional cultural resources for political legitimacy. In this context, this paper provides a critique of the dominant Weberian understanding of political legitimacy and an alternative conceptual framework to theorize the use of traditional cultural resources. Through a critical engagement with official and intellectual discourses since 2002, it conceptualizes the use of traditional cultural resources in a discursive context as a technique to organize moral power in society whereby the moral foundations of notions of power and authority are reconstructed and legitimized.

Key Words: Political Legitimacy, China, Authoritarianism, Traditional Culture, Weberian Framework, Constructivism.

Introduction

This paper probes the limits of the Weberian approach to understanding political legitimacy in non-electoral and non-democratic political systems by taking up the case of China. It identifies that the Weberian approach to political legitimacy has two limitations at a theoretical level. One, the concept of legitimacy itself is problematic in the context of non-western, non-electoral political systems from a comparative perspective. It ignores the interactions between the ruling elites and the ruled in a discursive context as consequential for shaping the dynamics of legitimacy in a non-electoral and authoritarian political system. As a result, it negates the agency of the ruled. Secondly, the Weberian understanding of political legitimacy does not allow a possibility for multiple ways of organizing power in society. The utility of the Weberian approach is over-emphasized to understand the processes and nature of the political transition to an electoral democratic political system.

This paper proposes a different conceptual framework for understanding political legitimacy from a constructivist perspective. It contends that the constructivist perspective acknowledges the possibility of multiples ways of organizing social and political order and dynamic interactions between the ruled and the ruling in a discursive manner to theorize political legitimacy. Political legitimacy is not only shaped by the interactions between the ruling and the ruled but also by the existing social and cultural norms and morals. Social norms and morals inform how people conceive and view power and authority. Therefore, cultural symbols, ideas, beliefs, and practices shape the nature of political legitimacy irrespective of the type of political system.

To do so, it conceptualizes the use of traditional cultural resources in contemporary China in terms of the concept of culture as a technique of organizing power. It refers to how cultural norms, attitudes, practices, symbols, and beliefs help shape the moral foundations of the notions of power and authority in a society. In turn, this allows the dominant actors namely state or ruling elites to organize both material and ideational power in a morally and politically legitimate way.

It makes two preliminary propositions. One, the use of the traditional cultural resource as a technique to (re)organize power in contemporary China is consequential for the questions of political legitimacy. It helps the Communist Party of China (hereafter the CPC) to reorganize the moral and ideological foundations of social and political order. The CPC has gradually attempted to bring in ideological changes both in terms of moral foundations of its rule and institutional reforms as the nature of underlying socio-economic realities change since 1978. The successive administrations have increasingly relied on traditional cultural resources to justify an authoritarian political system. Secondly, these ideological changes are taking place in a discursiveness context wherein the notions of power, social order, and authority are mutually constructed through the interactions between the ruling elite and the ruled. In short, this

framework suggests that the political legitimacy of the CPC is stickier than the Weberian approaches indicate.

Constructivist understanding of political legitimacy suggests that norms, values, and institutions are mutually constructed through the dynamic interactions between the people and the rulers (Beetham 1990). In other words, legitimacy is a social construction brought about by various types of social and political processes. The experiences of democratization in non-western regions show that multiple types of political systems exist simultaneously in the world today. Besides, democracy as a form of political and institutional system with its own set of practices, ideas, and values has taken a variety of models across the world. The multiple models of democracy as a political system reflect how different ways in which existing moral and cultural foundations of power and authority underlying social, political, and institutional order interact and adapt to democracy as a new cultural and political system. The Weberian approaches to understanding political legitimacy are prescriptive because they tend to assume an ideal political system in the form of the western electoral democratic system. As a result, they misunderstand the dynamics of legitimacy in political systems that do not fit into the institutional and value system underlying democracy to be the right way to organize power in society.

Sources

The paper uses three sets of literature. First, writings on political legitimacy from the social constructivist perspective. Secondly, literature on comparative democratization in non-western regions. It builds upon the arguments in the two sets of studies to develop the core ideas of the paper-culture as a technique of organizing society and the role discursiveness in the social construction of political legitimacy in an authoritarian context. Thirdly, it analyses various types of sources-academic works, press reports, speeches of leaders, and government reports-published in mainland China both in English and Chinese languages.

Methodology

The paper aims to develop an alternative conceptual framework in response to the arguments in the existing literature on political legitimacy in China. The paper uses content analysis to select sources published in mainland China using key conceptual and discursive categories that figure in official discourses. These categories namely excellent traditional culture (优秀传统文化), harmonious society (和谐社会), national rejuvenation (民族伟大复兴) are used in political and academic discourses frequently. Secondly, it uses discourse analysis to interpret and analyse qualitative sources. It studies two administrations since 2002. The year 2002 marks a break in official ideology because the CPC made an ideological change in the form of the Theory of Three Represents.

Organization

The paper has four sections. The first section identifies the limitations of the Weberian approach to understanding the questions and problems of political legitimacy in China. It critically analyses the existing literature to highlight theoretical gaps. The second section develops the idea of ‘culture as a technique of power’ to understand political legitimacy. The third section analyses the use of traditional values, ideas, practices, and symbols by the CPC since 2002 to substantiate the propositions and claims made in the previous sections. The last section provides conclusions and highlights the main points for further debates.

1. Political Legitimacy: Theory, Practice, and Problems

The role of traditional culture in contemporary Chinese politics concerning domestic political legitimacy has caught the attention of scholars (He 1996; Zhao 1997; Jinghan Zeng 2014). The literature has explored various aspects of the use of philosophical ideas in the CCP propaganda, speeches of leaders, and the articulation of policies (Callahan 2013), the frequent use of traditional symbols in policy debates and narratives (Brady 2012; Perry 2013).

The proliferation of literature on the role of traditional ideas coincides with an increasing use of traditional cultural norms, ideas, beliefs, and practices in policies and party propaganda. Market-oriented policies since 1978 have changed the socio-economic and political realities leading to diminished hold of the traditional ideology of communism and Maoism to legitimize policies and the political legitimacy of the party. Although the party has gradually brought in ideological changes since it began to adopt economic reforms, the theory of three represents marks a radical break in its ideology. The new idea introduced in 2002 indicated that it had deviated from its original mandate of representing the interests of the peasants and workers to bring about a socialist and egalitarian society. Hereafter, the party began to frame policy debates and articulate political narratives by referring to moral ideas, practices, symbols, and beliefs from traditional culture.

The existing literature on political legitimacy in China has framed the questions about the use of traditional cultural resources in terms of Weberian notions of legitimacy, power, authority, and institutionalization. The studies grounded in the Weberian approach to political legitimacy take for granted that the party faces a legitimacy crisis. It evaluates the nature of political legitimacy in China against the model of the electoral democratic political system. The fundamental ideas of Weberian legitimacy rationalization of bureaucracy and institutions, the impersonal nature of law and authority are grounded in political culture and institutional framework of the electoral democratic political system. While this paper does not contest the claims of the legitimacy crisis advanced in this trend of literature, it argues that the Weberian approach limits a possibility for strong political legitimacy based on processes, ideas, and beliefs that do not represent the ideal type of political system, that is, electoral democracy. The absence of elections negates the possibility of dynamic interactions between the people and the state in discursive space. Weber’s

typology of political legitimacy distinguishes rules and laws in modern and traditional political systems. Political legitimacy in the modern state is derived from rational and objective adherence to the rules and laws contrary to the traditional notion of authority based on charisma and respect for traditions (Lassman and Speirs 1994). It's an ideal social type. By distinguishing traditional and modern laws, the Weberian approach discredits the use of traditional cultural resources normatively in favour of rationalization, and electoral democratic processes.

This problem is significant because, despite the legitimacy crisis identified by the Weberian approaches, the party has enjoyed relatively stable legitimacy. The literature has emphasized strict political control over the economy, the suppression of alternative organized social and political life outside the party structures, technological surveillance, and use of extensive security apparatus explain the various aspects of its rule. Andrew Nathan explains the “authoritarian resilience” in terms of institutionalization. The growing professionalism, functional specialization, a relative degree of openness in providing information on policy issues, and the routinization of party structures and processes help party cop up with a legitimacy crisis (Nathan and Gilley 2003; Nathan 2003). Joseph Fewsmith explains the resilience of the party legitimacy in terms of the reassertion of centralized party structures and norms rather than the institutionalization of formal state structures. The institutionalization of the state structures is incompatible with the norms and processes of the centralized party structure (Fewsmith). Both Nathan and Fewsmith disagree about what institutionalization means. But they share common theoretical assumptions that institutionalization in the Weberian sense is a necessary condition for building political legitimacy (Fewsmith and Nathan 2019).

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, scholars extensively explored the links between economic reforms and political liberalization (He 1996; Gilley 2004; Perry 2013). The democratization paradigm assumed the inevitability of liberalization in China. Such assumptions were rooted in Weberian understanding of rationalization as a result of economic changes. In fact, the Weberian assumptions about the relationship between economic and political changes dominate literature in other areas on China namely economics. Chinese scholars have extensively dealt with Weber’s writings on the relationship between culture and capitalism to argue that Confucianism does not hamper commerce and capitalism (Tongdong 2012). But again, these studies have failed to explain the relative stability of the party rule, and the failure of the economic reforms to engender political reforms.

The existing literature fails to explain the stickier nature of political legitimacy in China. The failure stems from two reasons. One, electoral democratic political system idealized by Weber is not an inevitability. In other words, an ideal type of political system theorized by Weber does not exist in its perfect form, and it is not a universal model of organizing power in society. The studies informed by Weberian theories take for granted the normative superiority of democracy as a political system in comparison to other types of political systems. There are various models

of the social and political order of which a democratic political system is one. The moral foundations of political legitimacy are rooted in norms, beliefs, ideas, practices, and institutions. This paper terms them collectively as cultural resources for the brevity of discussion. These cultural resources differ from one society to another. Hence, there exists a variety of ways of organizing power. The studies on comparative democratization suggest that despite institutional similarities, electoral democratic political systems differ because the local cultural resources interact and shape the notions of power and authority in different ways with democratic political system and institutions (Lamb 2014).

In sum, the literature on the role of traditional cultural resources in China falls into two groups. One, there is a tendency to over-emphasize the role of traditional cultural resources that presents the challenge of falling into the trap of cultural exceptionalism. For instance, the works of Jiang Qing and Daniel Bell fall into this category.¹ On the other, the use of traditional cultural resources is conceptualized as an authoritarian attempt to retain power backed up by performance legitimacy and coercion. The literature using the Weberian framework to understand legitimacy falls in this category.

Some scholars have gone beyond the established paradigms to understand why the political legitimacy of the party is relatively stable. Schubert put forward a multi-dimensional idea of legitimacy formulated as the “zones of legitimacy” emphasizing that there is a multiplicity of sources of legitimacy (Schubert 2008). This new formulation goes beyond the teleology of the democratic paradigm and the fetishism for rationalization and institutionalization to explain political legitimacy. It recognizes the efficacy of moral and ideological changes brought in by the party to adapt to new socio-economic realities. But he does not provide a conceptual scheme how different “zones of legitimacy” are interconnected with each other. An article by Elizabeth Perry engages with the significance of the use of cultural resources for political legitimacy. She formulates the role of traditional cultural resources as cultural governance. She defines cultural governance as “the deployment of symbolic resources as an instrument of political authority” (Perry 2013). Her argument has two limitations. First, she develops the argument for the utility of cultural resources for legitimacy based on assumptions of the electoral democratic political system as a model wherein the interactions between the rulers and the ruled take place through electoral and other institutional processes, and she takes it for granted. Secondly, she bases her argument within the Weberian framework. As it is argued in this paper that Weberian framework is conceptually weak to understand political legitimacy as a social scientific concept in a comparative perspective. She formulates the idea of cultural governance in terms of identity politics rather than recognizing the possibility for an alternative moral and institutional framework of discursive legitimacy that provides a relatively stable political regime. The paper

¹ Jiang Qing’s proposal to reform political system according to Confucianism and his reading of the relevance of Confucianism is the most radical and comprehensive. For details see, (Jiang Qing 2013); Daniel Bell is another influential and widely read scholar who has put forward a proposal that argues for feasibility of stable political order based on traditional ideas of meritocracy and hierarchy. For details see, (Bell and Wang Pei 2020)

takes these arguments as departure point to develop the conceptual framework but instead uses constructivist perspectives.

2. Culture as a Technique of Power: (Re)Constructing Normative Foundations of Power and Authority

Culture is a discursive category whose meanings are constructed through social interactions. Hence, it is a fluid and dynamic concept. It helps shape the moral and normative foundations of social order. The theories of culture from different disciplinary perspectives reveal the dominant actors in a society attempt to control and shape normative and moral ideas to shape social relations and institutions that favour their material interests. As such, it functions as a technique of (re)organizing the moral order of society.²

Noah Feldman argues that the problem of democracy in Islamic societies lies in the fact that democracy and Islam as a religious-cultural system represent two different types of cultural systems. The legitimacy of two different ways of organizing power relies upon different sets of cultural resources both normatively and institutionally (Feldman 2003). In other words, democracy and Islamic societies (religion) represent two different values systems that organize power in society in two different ways by organizing social relations based on two different sets of moral values, ideals, and institutions. His arguments explain why democracy as a political system finds it difficult to take hold in these societies. This is an instructive proposition. It entails that cultural resources determine the legitimacy of a political system because they provide moral foundations of social and political order or what I term "the organization of power" materially as well as normatively. Cultural resources shape the moral and normative foundations of institutional order and notions of authority and power. Besides they also shape political aspirations and ideals.

Democracy is a cultural system emerging from a particular historical and social context of western Europe and hence, it has cultural connotations (Parekh 1992). In that sense, it prescribes the organization of power in a society based upon a distinctive set of norms, ideas, beliefs, and practices. This way of thinking about democracy is relevant to understand why there might be some alternative political systems with a dynamic mix of ideas from different models including democracy. This also helps us to understand why democracy does not succeed in other societies with a certain degree of social coherence and rigid social system.

The literature on democratization mainly deals with how the interactions between two types of political systems with their respective norms, ideas, beliefs, and institutional arrangements take

² There is a rich and vast literature on the relationship between power and culture. By taking cues from literature, it suffices here to say that power and culture are intertwined and cannot be separated. In the unequal relationship between people and the ruling elite, the latter is at a dominant position to shape what culture means and constitutes of. But the discursive space in which these social processes take place does allow agency of the ruled however limited and constricted it might be. See, (Swartz 1997); (Gramsci 1971).

place. Or why one kind of political system, democracy, take different forms in different social and cultural contexts. This problem reveals a crucial point that culture defined as norms, beliefs, and ideas that underpin power relations not only shape the nature of the organization of power but also that it can be used to alter the status quo. Democratic experiments in non-European contexts attest that the culture of democracy helps alter moral and normative foundations of existing political and social order.

The cultural specificity of democracy lies in the moral values (equality, freedom), ideas (individualism), practices (the universal franchise, institutional accountability and checks, and balances), and institutional mechanisms (parliament) it prescribes. These ideas, practices, and institutional mechanisms inform the notion of power and authority that is particular to the democratic political system. In an electoral democratic political system, the moral authority of political power and authority depends on the ideas of social contract and expression of general will through electoral and other institutional processes. These institutional mechanisms and processes obtain legitimacy based on values and ideals of individual liberty and freedom, progress, etc. On the other hand, Islam vests the sources of political power and authority in the holy book, the Quran, and the historical practices namely the Caliphate. Hence, it envisions the relationship between state, society, and individual different from democracy. In this sense, the category, culture, includes communism, caste, religion, and democracy.

The social construction perspective on political legitimacy would postulate the idea that democracy takes different forms depending upon the cultural context and how democratic ideas interact with alternative ways of organizing power in a society. The literature from constructivist perspectives on political transition in the non-European context emphasizes that the discursive interactions between the rulers and the ruled are crucial to understanding the actual historical processes and the nature of political legitimacy. These interactions are a two-way process and take place within the shared moral and normative space that determines the legitimacy of power relations. In the shared normative space, the ruled exercise the agency in constantly shifting normative context by accepting or rejecting norms and ideas based upon their existing beliefs. Hence, a “power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs” (Beetham, 1991). The discursive interactions take place even in authoritarian contexts. Therefore, the idea that discursive interactions between the ruled and the ruling elites determine political legitimacy irrespective of the type of political system allows a comparative analysis of the use of culture as a technique to organize power.

Looking from this framework, an investigation of the logic and objectives of the use of traditional cultural resources in political practices provides an alternative way of understanding political legitimacy in China. Weberian approach to understanding political legitimacy normatively prioritizes western electoral democracy as a universal idea and a yardstick to assess the nature of social and political order. As a result, it limits the possibility of alternative ways of organizing power normatively. The conceptual framework developed in this paper does not make

any claim about the normative superiority of any model of the political system. It makes a simple claim that there exist alternative ways of organizing power normatively legitimized on cultural resources other than democracy and provide stable social and political order. In such an alternative political order, political legitimacy is shaped through discursive interaction between the ruled and the ruling elite in a shared normative space.

3. Traditional Cultural Resources and Remaking of Social and Political Order

Since its formation in 1921 and a ruling party since 1949, the CPC's political legitimacy rested upon the class-based understanding of society rooted in Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. In this ideological scheme, the mandate of the party was to bring in changes to root out class differences and theoretically even state itself to establish an egalitarian and classless society. The use of traditional cultural resources goes against the class-based understanding of society. The traditional ideas have gained traction in academic and official discourses in the mainland in the early years of the 21st century paralleling the changes in ideological and moral ideas by the party to articulate policies during the first term of Hu Jintao onwards.³

The changes in ideological bases of legitimacy have taken place gradually since the early 1980s as the underlying social, economic, and political dynamics changed. The changes in policies necessitated the need for changes in the ideological and moral foundations of legitimacy in two ways. One, the Marxist and Maoist-Leninist ideological justifications of political legitimacy could not be justified any longer. Jiang Zemin's regime brought about new changes in education policy in 1992 in its efforts to instil patriotic values and it was the first institutional effort to bring in ideological and moral change for reorienting the moral foundations of political legitimacy of the party. It was part of the party's efforts to become a 'governing party' from a 'revolutionary party.' After more than two decades of economic reforms, the CPC introduced a fundamental change in its ideological basis when it introduced the concept of 'three represents' in 2002. This marked a major change formally brought into the ideological and party structures.

As such, the changes represent a gradual shift necessitated by the decaying relevance of Marxism and Maoist-Leninist ideology. In other words, the socio-economic changes brought in by reform policies changed the dynamics of the organization of power within society. The party no longer represented its original mandate of representing the interests of peasants and the working class through the means of class struggle. The conflict-based class understanding of society became a thing of the past in the ideological, moral, and political positions of the party. The party now also claimed to represent "China's advanced culture" in addition to a revolutionary socialist culture that became secondary gradually (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China 2002).

³ For an overview of debates on great harmony in the early years of the 21st century in China, (Callahan 2004). The common theme among these discourses is that the idea of great harmony is a state-centric model of domestic and world political order. Secondly, the idea of great harmony is represented as a blend of socialist and great harmony discourse. Hence, the discourse on harmonious society promoted during the Hu Jintao period in articulating official narratives and policies is termed as a "harmonious socialist society."

Therefore, the formal changes brought in 2002 represent a radical break with the past. Hereafter, gradual but steady efforts have been made to bring in the party-led revival of traditional values, ideas, and practices to bring about a complete overhaul of the ideological and moral basis of political legitimacy. The revival of traditional culture coincides with emerging nationalism as the economic and military capabilities of China rises. Zhaoguang Ge, a Chinese historian, states that there are three reasons why Chinese intellectuals and state desire to go back to traditional ideas and cultural resources. First, there is a strong desire to search for coming out of the “grip of western culture” and its impact on China’s institutions, ideas, and culture in the last couple of centuries. This desire emanates, with political implications, from a desire to seek a Chinese and native foundation of the values with an alternative starting point that China should adhere to in the contemporary period. Second, there is a strong desire to search for Chinese identity rooted in Chinese people’s understanding of their history, culture, and traditions. Finally, intellectuals make efforts to “extract China from a century of western influence” aimed at searching for a new direction for future rooted in China’s own experience and culture (Zhaoguang 2018). Such a quest for an independent identity emanates from the need to justify the one-party rule. The accumulative result is a “Post-Marxist” and “Post-Maoist” politics in which moral and ideological foundations of social and political order are rooted in traditional Chinese cultural ideas and norms with the institutional structure of Maoist-Leninist state.⁴

Western ideas, models of political and social order have occupied Chinese intellectuals for more than a century and continue to be one of the dominant intellectual focus in contrast to which intellectuals attempt to formulate their questions and defence of Chinese culture and political system.⁵ Besides, references to ‘tradition’ are common to all intellectual currents across the spectrum. But as William Callahan states what includes tradition is problematic. For Chinese intellectuals, tradition also includes a one-party rule and revolutionary tradition of the 20th century (Callahan 2015). The efforts of intellectuals and the party focus on blending pre-1911 traditions represented by Confucianism and socialist-revolutionary traditions to bring about the moral and ideological foundation that can also legitimize the current political system of one-party rule. Philosopher Gan Yang argues the three traditions viz. Confucianism, Maoist revolutionary tradition of the 20th century, and market reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping should be integrated (Gan Yang)⁶. Similarly, scholars like Hu Angang and Zhao Tingyang also think the blending of the three traditions is a ‘correct’ path to follow (Hu Angang 2013; Zhao Tingyang 2011). Political Scientist Pan Wei considers adopting the western democratic model of the political system as “enslavement and decline” and hence “China’s rejuvenation” is the only way forward (Pan Wei 2009). These traditions are contradictory to each other in terms of the values, social, and political system they envision. William Callahan rightly states that the efforts

⁴ For more details about the departure from Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology during the 1980s and 1990s see, (Misra 1998); (Guoxin Xing 2009).

⁵ For a review of the reform era intellectual currents see, (Cheek, Fogel, and Ownby 2020); (Goldman and Li 2012).

⁶ Jiang Shigong, a Constitutional Scholar, makes similar arguments, see (Jiang Shigong 2020).

to harmonize the three diverse and contradictory traditions to produce a new vision for 21st century China are full of tensions (Callahan 2015).

Chinese scholars in recent decades have advanced arguments that traditional cultural and political ideas are universal and provide alternative normative ideas for organizing social and political order. The apparent success of economic reforms in China seems to have led scholars to rethink the relationship between culture and capitalism via Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism. Chinese intellectuals have taken it as a departure point to argue that Chinese traditional ideas are relevant to the contemporary world to organize social and political order and offer experiences for other countries to follow. Philosopher Tongdong Bai from Fudan University has argued that Chinese traditional thought provides holistic and universal normative relevance to organize social and political order in contemporary times (Tongdong 2012). He builds his argument by critiquing the assumption in the modernization theories that culture shapes economic success. There is an emerging consensus on this critique in academia within and outside China. But his ideas on the relationship between equality and hierarchy in organizing society are not only against the dominant ideas of equality in discourses on democracy and hence contentious. Since the 1990s, Chinese intellectual writings have increasingly derived ideas from traditional Chinese thought to develop a conceptual, intellectual and moral defence of the existing social and political order. Dongdong Bai explores the classics to argue that ancient Chinese thinkers namely Confucius, Mencius, Xun Zi, etc. advocated equality on par with the idea of equality in democracy, he thinks that inequality in some form is inevitable. He advocates for the Confucian notion of hierarchical social and moral order as it benefits the least advantaged (Tongdong 2020). His appreciation for some form of hierarchy goes against ideas of equality in democratic theories and ideological tradition of Marxist-Leninism-Maoism. The fact that intellectuals have begun to promote such ideas on normative grounds indicates that Chinese society and politics are undergoing a normative change in which the ideas of equality and social order prevalent during the Mao period are no longer the dominant ideas. The overarching objectives of these intellectual trends and writings are to defend existing order normatively while change and revolution of the previous era take backseat.⁷

Hu Jintao, the general secretary of the CPC and President of China 2002-2012, spearheaded institutional and ideological changes during his period. As he recognized that China's "social structure and ideological set-up was in a major shake-up" due to changes brought in by economic reforms and market-oriented policy, the party required to focus on bringing in traditional ideas to "strengthen ideological and ethical build-up" (Hu Jintao 2005). An analysis of Hu Jintao's speeches in different contexts suggests that the resources for ideological and ethical changes were supposed to be derived from traditional cultural ideas and practices. There have been extensive writings on the reasons why Hu Jintao fell back upon traditional normative ideas to

⁷ For a review of views and ideas of Chinese scholars take state and political stability as the central objective since the 1990s, see, (Veg 2019).

stave off domestic issues namely increasing inequality, environmental degradation, etc. that challenged the legitimacy of the party.⁸

There are two trends during the Hu Jintao period in intellectual and official discourses. One, a state-centric political order that emphasized political and social stability was the main objective. Secondly, the Chinese traditional cultural resources and political ideas are useful to organize modern social and political order as an alternative to western democracy. These two trends have strengthened during Xi Jinping's period while the ideological and political environment has become rigid. Soon after the 18th Party Congress, Document 9 issued by the General Office of the CPC after the Third Plenum of the CPC enumerated the following western ideas that posed a threat to the party rule. They are as follows: constitutionalism, questioning the idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics, promotion of historical nihilism by questioning the history of the party, promoting neoliberalism, western ideas of independent journalism, universal values that threaten the theoretical foundations of the party rule, and independent civil society (China File 2013).

Document 9 was the initial indication of the hardening ideological positions of the party in the subsequent period. Scholars have pointed out that the nature of the leadership of Xi Jinping has marked a break from the idea of 'collective leadership' and the processes of institutionalization in the Post-Mao period (Shirk 2018). Xi's leadership is also marked by Mao-style leadership and political mobilization through campaigns, big-banner posters, and personality cult with the centralization of power (Meng 2013; Hernández 2018). Maoism in its various forms still counts as a major force in Chinese politics and ultra-Maoist sympathizers are vocal (Blanchette 2019). While all these arguments hold true in various measures, Xi Jinping's leadership is different from Mao concerning the ideological and normative resources used to articulate aspirations, objectives, and tools of policies. Although, the state structures are similar to Leninist-Party state and scholars have also noted the similarities between Mao-style policy implementation that provides flexibility in changes in policies.⁹ Yet, the party has changed, gradually, the normative framework within which it articulates policy objectives and values that inform its propaganda. Xi Jinping's articulation of the grand narrative of "China Dream" reflect similarities with the type of leadership the party had under Mao. Mao's use of catchy phrases and slogans to articulate grand objectives find place in Xi Jinping's style of functioning. The narrative of China Great is grounded in the idea of reviving and rejuvenating Chinese traditional culture and its glory specifically.¹⁰ It is aimed at building Chinese society in the image of traditional society. Foreign ideas have no place in this scheme. As Xi Jinping at his address at the 80th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Central Party School and the opening ceremony of the 2013 said "Chinese traditional culture is extensive and profound, and learning and mastering the

⁸ For a summary of core issues, themes, and arguments in this regard see, (Mohanty 2012).

⁹ See, (Heilmann and Perry 2013).

¹⁰ Philosopher Chen Ming has been one of the many Chinese scholars who have attempted to make case for Confucian reading of China Dream, see (Chen Ming).

essence of various ideas is very beneficial to establishing a correct world outlook, outlook on life, and values" (Xi 2013). The efforts are aimed at changing the normative and ideological outlook of the people in the long-run to normatively justify its right to rule and construct political legitimacy in a discursive space.¹¹

Normative shift rather than just emotional and nationalist shift in outlook in the key goal. The literature has well documented the propaganda efforts since 1980s to bring in changes with nationalist and patriotic campaigns deriving on resources from both pre-revolutionary and revolutionary traditions.¹² The main objective is to build a moral and normative space that provide a compass to judge policy outcomes and the political legitimacy of the party itself in the absence of any overarching normative framework unlike other political systems wherein either religion or constitution provides normative framework and discursive space within which political legitimacy is constructed. As some commentators have alluded to it, the party strives to build such a normative framework and social capital grounded in traditional Chinese culture (Brown 2015).

The efforts to inject traditional cultural resources into party structures, leadership styles and normative thinking about authority among the people through education, moral campaigns and propaganda are targeted at the autonomy of normative social capital sourced from traditional cultural resources that helps CCP to stave off ideas of democracy¹³. Culture, here, functions as a technology of reorganizing normative power. Thus, it has two consequences: one, it allows CCP to have control over society in a way that makes it relatively stronger in state-society dynamics; secondly, it helps the party to stave off ideological criticism from the west. As a result, it equips the party with the moral authority to rule.

The leadership style reflects a mix of traditional symbols, paternalistic policies, and populism (Bin 2016). Populism is not new to Chinese politics. But the renewed vigour with which leadership uses the traditional resources along with a populist, coercive, and economic-growth centric policies, it is a new dimension of leadership style emerging in contemporary times.¹⁴ Anti-corruption campaigns and tours in poverty-stricken areas in the country-side and urban localities by top leadership are two examples in the recent decade. A critical analysis of official narratives, in this regard, indicate that the normative foundations of authority is being redefined through traditional ideas, values and norms. Xi Jinping has frequently visited poverty-stricken areas with carefully choreographed tours that are targeted at the larger audience especially the

¹¹ On this point also see, (Perry 2013).

¹² (Brady 2008); (Suisheng Zhao 2004)

¹³ For moral education campaigns, and propaganda emphasizing on traditional Chinese culture during Xi Jinping's period see, (Kubat 2018); (Zi Yang 2017)

¹⁴ On Populism in China see, Liping cited in (Fewsmith 2008).

poorer sections that party cares for them to tame the problems that four decades of economic reforms have resulted in like rising economic inequality.¹⁵

The Care for poor people reflected in the widely-used terms such as “people-centred governance” and moral character of party cadres and leadership in Xi Jinping’s speeches and party propaganda is a symbol of traditional authority and role of the state in people’s lives.¹⁶ The authority of traditional cultural resources come from their reference to Classics in Xi Jinping’s speeches (The People’s Daily Review Department 2015). For Xi Jinping, traditional culture is “soul” and “foundation” of Chinese society (Zhao Yinping 2016). The fact that the use of traditional culture to bring in ideological and normative changes were introduced in party schools and other agencies speaks the scope of the efforts.¹⁷ It thus became linchpin of moral and ideological campaigns in anti-corruption drive under Xi Jinping and school education and curricula reforms since 2013.

There is a pattern in Jinping’s speeches as well as the party’s use of traditional symbols, ideas, and practices that points towards the possibility of using traditional culture are being selectively used to reorganize moral power in the society. This trend is that of no reference to ideas, symbols, or practices from Christianity meaning that the party is relying on a certain type of moral ideas that are conducive to a certain type of social organization. Christianity represents a different set of moral values like individualism, human rights, and social organization than Confucianism. This is not to say that the party is adopting these traditional thoughts in their totality. These trends of thought contain complex and sometimes contradictory ideas. Rather the party chooses certain ideas and values that suit its own political and mobilizational agenda.

The party is attempting to tap moral and cultural resources among people at large that it has helped harness in the last few decades. The disastrous impact of the cultural revolution on traditional cultural resources has been attempted to undo. Xi Jinping is credited with renovating traditional temples destroyed during cultural revolutions in Zhengding county in Hebei province during the early 1980s.¹⁸ Recent studies have shown that the local level party-state has promoted traditional social organizations namely temple organizations, clan, and other cultural organizations. The number of such organizations with vertical bonds of fellowship has increased in thousands. On the other hand, the state has tightened control over right-based organizations namely Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Metingley 2019).

¹⁵ The analysis of the tours of Xi Jinping is based on the data maintained at China Vitae: Travel and Appearances for Xi Jinping <http://www.chinavitae.com/vip/index.php?mode=events&type=cv&id=303>. The speeches given at different such tours are largely taken from media reports where speeches are quoted extensively to allow for thematic content and discourse analysis.

¹⁶ For the use of traditional ideas and symbols to articulate narratives and policy objectives see, (Xi Jinping 2014).

¹⁷ For detailed discussion on the idea of traditional culture and its use in different agencies and party schools, see, (Kubat 2018)

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of his work as a party official in the county especially the renovation of traditional temples and its context of the changing ideological contours of the party ideology at grassroots see, (Johnson 2017), chapter 20.

4. Conclusion

The basic question is what purpose does the use of traditional cultural resources for political legitimacy serve? This paper has outlined the major aspects, areas and purposes of using traditional cultural resources within the context of socio-economic changes since 1978. While the mobilization of traditional culture for the purpose of nationalist and identity construction, the coercive nature of the party rule are characteristics that define the Maoist-Leninist party state, the traditional cultural resources are used to reorganize moral and normative foundations of authority and social-political order. The increasing use of traditional norms, symbols and ideas to articulate policy objectives namely moderately prosperous society, rejuvenation of nation, great harmony and China Dream, etc. help reshape normative foundations of social and political order along these lines and away from revolutionary period ideas of equality, classless and egalitarian society. The party has made institutional adjustments most notably in the form of the theory of three represents that signalled its embrace of new ideas and practices. It is contented here that the reshaping of normative foundations of social order does provide a possibility that political legitimacy constructed via traditional resources might be stickier than Weberian approaches suggest.

The party's embrace of traditional culture has led to flourishing of traditional culture. The number of traditional organizations, institutions namely temples and pilgrim destinations have flourished. Besides, the study of traditional culture in universities, research institutes, and party schools have become linchpin of moral and ideological discourse. These trends also indicate that people's beliefs are embedded in traditional ideas that the party is trying to tap into. Therefore, the efficacy of the efforts to reorganize moral and normative foundations of social and political order depends on the discursive interaction with people. While the party sits at the advantageous position vis a vis people in defining traditional culture, people's role in legitimizing it is crucial. Therefore, if the party can overcome challenges namely income inequality and other governance issues relatively well, the traditional cultural resources can provide stable normative social-political order.

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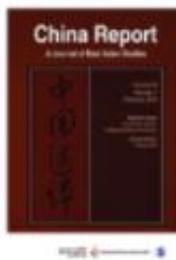


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