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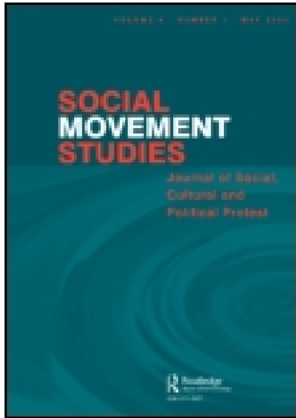

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Theorizing the Role of Culture in Social Movements: Illustrated by Protests and Contentions in Modern China

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Theorizing the Role of Culture in Social Movements: Illustrated by Protests and Contentions in Modern China

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ABSTRACT *This article provides an initial step toward an explanatory analysis of the role of culture in social movements. It argues that culture shapes collective actions through three ideal-typical mechanisms: as problem-solving tool-kits, as scripts, and as instincts and taken-for-granted routines. While any concrete collective actions may involve the working of all three mechanisms, the relative importance of the three mechanisms in a social movement varies with the structural conditions of a society. In particular, actors in poorly organized social movements are more likely to follow certain cultural scripts or even their culturally embedded emotions and instincts, while actors in a well-organized movement are more able to take the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit to pursue the targeted benefits. This distinction sets social movements under Western democracies apart from many collective actions under more repressive regimes with poorly organized society.*

KEY WORDS: Culture, social structure, social action, mechanism, ideal types, China

Culture is important in almost every aspect of social movements. The activity of movement participants is shaped by cultural conditions, a movement develops its subculture and brings cultural changes to the society, and the rise of a new culture will lead to the rise of new kinds of social movements. To limit the scope, however, this article focuses only on one issue, that is, how the patterns of social movement activities are shaped by the existing cultural conditions in a society. To illustrate the argument presented in this article, I draw examples from contemporary Chinese social movements, particularly the 1989 pro-democracy movement. I do so for two reasons. First, I know cases of modern Chinese social movements well enough so that I might more successfully avoid providing examples carrying serious biases or out of historical context. Second, twentieth-century China was an exceptional mosaic of deep-seated, persistent traditional cultures and Western ideologies introduced amidst its revolutionary turmoil. Therefore it has provided especially interesting cases for the observation of the role of cultural forces in social movement in their fullest complexity.

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The importance of culture in China's social movements does not need much arguing. During the 1989 pro-democracy movement, for example, the Beijing students took Hu Yaobang's sudden death and his memorial service as occasions for political action,[1] knelt in front of the People's Congress to hand in a petition, and frequently adopted slogans centered on loyalty, filial piety, images of extended family and other traditional Chinese virtues in order to mobilize supporters (Zhao, 2001, Ch. 9). These cultural behaviors played a crucial role during the movement (e.g. Esherick & Wasserstrom, 1990; Pye, 1990; Perry, 1992). What this article intends to do is to explore the mechanisms that link the cultural codes and patterns of collective actions and illustrate the working of these mechanisms by the episodes of social movements in modern China.

Studying the mechanisms that shape cultural behaviors has at least two advantages. First, 'all real cultures contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action ... A culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction' (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). Any civilization, including China, has inherited such a diverse cultural tradition that any social movement can understandably perform only part of it. Therefore, for any given collective action, we can always point out the operation of some cultural elements in it. Such an approach, therefore, tends to produce tautological argument. What is more fundamental to social movement researche is to address questions such as why certain cultural elements dominated in a particular movement, or why similar cultural elements are repeated in different kinds of social movements, and so on.

Second, movement activities are not monolithic either. The activities of the 1989 movement, for example, were not only informed by traditional Chinese culture but also showed a strong imprint of more recently incorporated Western culture and the communist political culture. Yet, in the end, among the panoply of culturally embedded activities that the movement had displayed, it was the traditional culture that caught the hearts of millions of Chinese and shaped the movement's dynamics (Zhao, 2000, 2001). Instead of interpreting certain movement activities in cultural terms or merely pointing out affinities between certain forms of movement activities and some cultural elements, a more fruitful starting point is to treat social actors as embedded in a set of cultural scripts containing conflicting and even contradictory messages, and to explore the mechanisms that facilitated the domination of some culture codes over others in shaping the actors' behavior.

Culture and Social Action

Before discussing the role of culture in social action, we first briefly define culture. As noted by Brownstein (1995, p. 313) and Steinmetz (1999, p. 4), culture has acquired more than 160 different definitions in history. Although the definitions differ in all sorts of ways, an important difference lies in what is included in the definition. Many scholars include in the concept of culture not only those that exist in people's heads and in social relations but also in almost every other aspect of social life, including what we traditionally see as social structures (Sahlins, 1976; Foucault, 1977, 1978; Sewell, 1985; Bourdieu, 1990; Meyer, 1999; Polletta, 2004). They believe that culture constitutes both social experience and social structure, and that culture should be seen as socially organized practices rather than what exists in people's minds. Social structures are just 'cultural schemas invested with and sustaining resources' (Sewell, 1992, p. 21).

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I accept the above definition at the level of ontology. Indeed, culture shapes every possible aspect of human life, be it individual, collective, or social institutional. Not only those elements that we traditionally consider as structural forces (such as forms of government or a society's class structure) are part of culture, even our biological behaviors – those behaviors we share with other mammals such as eating, mating and sleeping – are deeply modified by cultures and become largely cultural behaviors. Yet, as Swidler (1995, p. 31) has keenly commented, the above 'global approaches to the study of culture can also be difficult to grasp firmly, either theoretically of empirically'. Differentiation and categorization are the beginning of a scientific inquiry. It is only after conceptual categorizations of some related entities are made that we are able to examine their relationships. Once we adopt a broader cultural definition, all social phenomena become cultural phenomena, and social sciences become 'cultural studies' in its British sense (Smith, 1998, p. 9). Under the broader cultural definition, researchers have two methodological choices. The first is to take interpretation, rather than explanation, as the goal of research. This kind of approach has its merits, and sometimes generates insightful results. Yet, overall, as the writings of postmodernist scholars have shown, such approaches at their best tend to produce work that is stronger at deconstruction, but very weak at producing theories which deserve serious attention. The second is to recreate concepts/categories under a general culture paradigm. The problem is that many concepts that they have created are interpretative. Most new concepts only paraphrase a certain meaning of cultural practice in a biased manner. They lack a clear ontological base, and no such things have ever existed in society, even in impure and ideal forms (similar to the concept of ether in physics). Bourdieu, for instance, is a genius in creating such concepts. Just in a short article (Bourdieu, 1999) he coins five different kinds of capital concepts: the capital of physical force, economic capital, information capital, symbolic capital, and juridical capital. It is easy to imagine that such conceptualization of various social capitals can be extended almost infinitely to make the whole social sciences an enterprise of capitalology. Nevertheless, not only are the capital concepts highly value-laden (they implicitly hold an instrumental assumption of human behavior and an objective view of social structural forces) but they are also even less clear than traditional structural concepts such as network, class, state, nation, gender, etc. In short, I see too much limitation in the research associated with the broader cultural definition.

Many empirically minded sociologists tend to follow Weberian and Durkheimian traditions and designate the epistemological location of culture in people's minds and in social relations.[2] Goodenough (1956) argues that all that a researcher needs to know about culture, in so far as it affects behavior, is that it is located in the minds of social actors. Alexander (1998, p. 30) defines culture as 'an organized set of meaningfully understood symbolic patters'. Swidler (1986) conceives culture as a 'tool-kit' of rituals, symbols, stories, and worldviews that people use to construct strategies of action.

The narrow definitions more or less exclude other structural elements of society from the realm of culture. Such definitions allow us to explore the patterns of relationships among culture, other structural forces and social actions and to explain their relationships. Traditionally, the narrow definition has a tendency to locate culture only in people's minds (Geertz, 1973; Polletta, 2004). Tilly (1999, p. 410) argues that such definitions pack culture into 'particular human brains as preferences, cognitive filters, memories, or something of the sort, but they then lack any plausible account of culture's collective character, much less of its interdependence and systematic change'. He thus emphasizes

that culture is 'shared understandings and their representations' of a given population (1999, p. 412), and advocates a relational approach in the study of culture. I completely agree with this view. Indeed, even for those scholars who believe that culture is located in people's minds, they tend to capture the functioning of culture by concepts such as customs, values, norms, symbols, rituals and beliefs. These concepts all imply that culture is collective and shared.

On the other hand, although culture exists in social relations, in terms of its impact on social action, its epistemological location has to be inside human brains. At issue is that the culture of a population is always much more extensive in its contents than what an individual or a collectivity can perform at a particular time/place. It thus needs some mental process or process of collective deliberation (when it is organizational-based decision making) that allows the people to choose or simply to perform some cultural elements rather than others. Our task as sociologists is, therefore, as Tilly (1999, p. 411) argues, to treat culture 'as changing phenomena to be explained rather than as ultimate explanations of all other social phenomena'.

A good starting point to study culture's role in social movements by taking into consideration culture's mental, stable, changeable and relational properties is Tilly's idea of the contention repertoire. Tilly (1995, p. 41) defines a contention repertoire as 'the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests'. The concept is both mental and relational because the 'elements of the repertoire are ... simultaneously the skills of the population members and the cultural forms of the population' (Stinchcombe, 1987). However, in his original formulation, Tilly limited the concept to a stock of collective action forms such as machine breaking, terrorism, sit-ins, hunger strikers, petitions and demonstrations that are available to a particular population at a given time and place (Tilly, 1978, p. 151). This article extends Tilly's concept of the contention repertoire to the cultural repertoire, including in it not only the forms of contentious collective action but also the linguistic and other resources available to a population. This cultural repertoire does not contain a coherent text, but has conflicting symbols, values, ideologies and traditions that are there to be appropriated by the movement participants, and it exists mainly in social relations rather than in people's minds. Nevertheless, in order to function normally in a society – that is, to allow their actions to be seen as meaningful by others – the mind of an individual has to be equipped with many scripts in the cultural repertoire. Social actors appropriate cultural repertoire in different ways: by following the cultural codes they are familiar with or by innovatively using or modifying the existing cultural script.

Steven Lucas (1974) argues that power exercises its impact on social actions at three levels: the ability to gain the upper hand in conflict decision making, to set self-promoting values, rituals and institutional procedures in conflict decision making, and to make social conflict latent in a sense that the subordinated groups are so indoctrinated that they are no longer conscious of their real interests. Although culture and power have been conceptualized differently, it is easy to imagine that culture and power are functionally equivalent in the sense that culture also has the capacity to modify the social actor's environment and even orient an actor toward doing things that the actor otherwise would not do. Like power, culture also exercises its impact on social actors' behavior through three similar mechanisms (all in ideal forms): interest and strategy, value and ideology, and instinct and habit. Let's name these three mechanisms tool-kit, script and instinct.

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On the level of interest and strategy, culture functions as what Swidler (1986) calls the 'tool-kit' from which actors select different pieces for constructing lines of action. At this level, actors are able to strategize their activities in the existing cultural repertoire for intended effects. Early during the 1989 movement, when the Chinese government published the 26 April *People's Daily* editorial that labeled the movement as a turmoil agitated by a small number of black hands, the students initiated a demonstration to defy the government's attack. However, during the demonstration, the students dropped their earlier demands such as free media, free association and democracy, and limited their slogans to the existing social problems (e.g. corruption and inflation). Regarding this behavior, some scholars argue that the 1989 movement was more like a traditional remonstration of Chinese intellectuals than a modern pro-democracy movement (Esherick & Wasserstrom, 1990; Pye, 1990). Another study, however, showed that the students did so mainly out of strategic considerations. By defying the *People's Daily* editorial with a large-scale demonstration, the students had already made their intention very clear. Yet, by shouting slogans centered on the social problems of common concern, the demonstration won the hearts of tens of millions of urban Chinese, and avoided giving the government excuses for an immediate repression (Zhao, 2001, Ch. 6).

The 'tool-kit' mechanism captures humans' capacity to appropriate culture. Social actors' learning capacity allows them not only to adopt strategies from an existing repertoire but also to improvise and innovate. Strategies and learning are, therefore, the major sources of cultural changes.[3] On the other hand, cultural repertoire changes slowly and most only at the margins, which gives culture a stability even during the most unsettled times. Tilly's (1986) study on the change of contention repertoire in France after the sixteenth-century and the social conditions behind such changes is a classic example in this regard.

The second mechanism through which the cultural repertoire exercises its impact on social action is at the level of value and ideology. Under this mechanism, culture functions as 'scripts' or 'texts' that shape social actions (Hunt, 1984; Geertz, 1973, 1983). Some scholars also try to differentiate culture scripts and ideologies, but here I treat both as cultural 'texts'. When people are committed to certain cultural scripts or ideologies, they tend to follow them. Swidler (1995, p. 36) puts this nicely:

> When activists demand ideological purity to undermine their enemies and consolidate their alliances, they make ideas powerful from the outside in. When a political meeting decides that individual leadership violates its principles, or that fetal tissue research threatens the right to life, ideas can acquire a power to affect action.

Under this mechanism, the criterion for actors' decision is no longer gain or loss but right or wrong. The actors follow certain cultural 'scripts' because they are emotionally attached to certain values or believe that this is the right thing to do even at the expense of their instrumental benefit as judged by others. The Clamshell Alliance was once a quite successful anti-nuclear movement in the USA. Yet, because the organization was committed to the value of anti-domination and consensual decision making, it became less and less able to reach consensus after its membership swelled. It greatly contributed to the movement's decline (Downey, 1986). Pye's (1990) analysis of the 1989 movement follows similar logic. He argues, for example, that the movement arose after the death of

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Hu Yaobang because a funeral is one of the few occasions when the Chinese are allowed to express their grievances publicly. He also argues that the 1989 movement was initiated out of students' personal grievances to problems such as high inflation and the declining status of intellectuals, not democracy. However, democracy became a surrogate for personal grievances because the collective-oriented Chinese culture regards any interest-based grievances as selfish. Also, according to Pye, the movement escalated because Chinese political conflict tends to take the form of a moral game. The students and the government had continuously tried to shame and out-moralize each other, which had no solution other than escalating confrontation.

Under this mechanism, actors may not be able to actively appropriate different elements in a cultural repertoire or expand the cultural repertoire to their benefit. Value (or custom, ideology and ritual) has almost total power over actors. In an extreme form, scholars of this tradition (e.g., Pye 1990) will analyze the semiotic structure of certain values and ideologies of a society and then demonstrate how the development of a historical event embodies that semiotic structure. Social actions become no more than a script-driven theatrical performance and historical analysis becomes an analysis of the cultural text. Yet, while cultural texts do exercise great impact on social actions, the cultural repertoire contains multiple and often conflicting texts, and different actors have different beliefs and values. Therefore, when we find, in a particular time/place, that the majority of a population follows a certain value or ideology, we need first to explain what contributes to the domination of this particular cultural text in the first place, rather than too quickly claim that 'history is a semiotic discursive process' (Sewell, 2005).

There is also a third mechanism through which culture can exercise an impact on social actions – it shapes social actions at the level of instinct, habit and taken-for-granted routines. The second and third mechanisms have a crucial difference. Under the second mechanism, when actors follow certain values and ideologies, they do so because they believe in them. The actors are still consciously aware what they are doing and why they are doing it. However, it is easy to understand that, similar to Lucas's (1974) discussion on the third dimension of power, for some cultural codes the actors can be so indoctrinated that they are able to act out the cultural codes instinctively without even invoking much thinking. Currently, most of the analysis of the impact of culture on social actions involves the first two mechanisms. However, many classic studies that emphasize the emotional or non-rational (it was often mistakenly treated as irrational at that time) aspects of the movement actually hinted at the existence of this mechanism (e.g. Blumer, 1946; Killian, 1984; Turner & Killian, 1987). Although Pye (1990) does not formalize the mechanisms behind his analysis, Chinese culture had such total power over the development of the 1989 movement that culture under his analysis must have exercised its impact on social actions at both conscious and subconscious levels.

One of the best-known episodes of the 1989 movement was the kneeling of three students in front of the Chinese People's Congress. This happened on 22 April when, after Hu Yaobang's state funeral, four student representatives were allowed to pass the police line and deliver a petition to the government. As the students approached the People's Congress, one of them suddenly knelt down and another two followed, with only one student remaining standing. During the imperial China era, kneeling in front of a government compound to present a petition was routine behavior. When this happened, the official in charge was expected to come out and receive the petition in public. This patterned behavior has frequently appeared in traditional Chinese novels and dramas,

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and the three students were no doubt influenced by the cultural code. In my interviews and in other documents, I see no indication that this action was pre-planned. What happened on the spot also suggests spontaneity because not all four students followed this unexpected action, and it was perhaps no accident that the one who refused to kneel was Wu'er Kaixi. As a Uigur student, he was apparently less influenced by traditional Chinese culture.

The example does not suggest that no cognition had been involved in the kneeling incident. In real life, instinct and cognition are intimately connected and an action even when started with instinct would trigger justifications in the process and afterward. The highly confounded relationship between instinct and cognition makes it difficult for us to provide a perfect real-life example for the functioning of instinctive routines in social action. However, the example does suggest that instinct, habits and taken-for-granted routines weigh importantly in activities that involve great emotions and spontaneity, and that when individuals act spontaneously they tend to act out what they are most familiar with, those cultural codes that have already been socialized as part of their taken-for-granted routine or instinct.

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Social Structure, Culture and Collective Action

Humans employ strategies, tend to follow what they believe, and act on instinct. Culture plays different roles in each of the three ideal situations: as a tool-kit in the first instance, a script in the second, and reveals itself through instinctive behaviors in the last. When we treat these three cultural dimensions of social actions as basic mechanisms or ideal types, few scholars have strong objections. However, once we intend to identify empirically what mechanisms are behind any real-life social action, it will always run into problems because the three mechanisms may all play a role in that action, and even the simplest social action can be interpreted in more than one way. A typical case is panic running in a burning theater. Traditionally, it was considered a non-rational instinctive behavior. However, rational choice theorists conclude that panic running is a rational action because in an emergency situation with no proper communication among individuals the most rational reaction for each individual in a burning theater is to run ahead of the others in trying to escape, even though it creates chaos and slows the pace of evacuation. Such an analysis is certainly logical. However, if we imagine a situation where it is not humans but a large herd of cows that are in a burning barn, the cows would perhaps escape in a similar way to humans. Since cows are certainly not capable of rational calculation, but still behave in the same way as humans in the same situation, a logical conclusion has to be that instinct may also figure importantly for humans in the same situation.

The highly confounded nature of human behaviors – that is, even the simplest form of behavior such as panic running may involve a mix of both cognition and instinct and can be interpreted perfectly in more than one way – creates a huge hurdle in directly applying the above three ideal typical mechanisms to empirical analysis. Fortunately, although at the micro level we may never be able to pin down the functioning of exact mechanism(s) in real-life social action, we should be able to analyze the relative importance of the above three mechanisms under different situations. In the following, I propose several propositions depicting the role of culture in social movements under different structural conditions. The propositions are intended only as initial steps to capture some of the important relationships between culture and collective actions under different organizational and political conditions, but by no means exhaust all the possible

relationships between culture and social action. These propositions should also be understood with the condition 'all other factors being equal' firmly in mind. (To highlight this, I repeat this phrase in the first of the following propositions.) I start with the most important one:

> 1. All other factors being equal, the bigger the role that SMOs (social movement organizations) have played in a social movement, the more likely that the movement actors are able to treat the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit and use it creatively for their perceived benefit.

The activities of social movement always ramify certain cultural patterns of a society. However, whether social movement actors are able to actively appropriate different elements inside the cultural repertoire or even innovate on the existing culture depends on how well that social movement is organized. The better organized a movement the more the movement actors are able to appropriate the culture and form strategies to advance their interests.[4] When the movement strategies concern rhetoric, the process of this cultural appropriation has been widely examined in social movement studies under the framework of frame analysis (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992; Benford, 1993, 1997; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Hank, 1995; Diani, 1996; Zald, 1996; Evans, 1997; Tarrow, 1994). As McAdam (1994, p. 38) argues, 'framing efforts can be thought of as acts of cultural appropriation, with movement leaders seeking to tap highly resonant ideational strains in mainstream society (or in a particular target subculture) as a way of galvanizing activism'.

This proposition recognizes 'the fluidity and flexibility of cultural practice' as well as 'the possibility of innovation and originality' (Perry, 1992, pp. 1-13). Moreover, it also lays out the structural conditions that allow actors to relatively free themselves from cultural bounds and make 'innovation and originality' possible in the first place. Following this logic, we are also able to reach the conclusion that, in comparison with social movements, the activities of the people in a riot tend to be more bounded by certain cultural scripts even though some individuals in a rioting crowd may have a very strong sense of freedom.

China scholars all agree that the languages and activities that the students employed during the 1989 movement closely followed traditional Chinese culture. Some scholars have attributed this traditionalism simply to the strong imprint of Chinese political culture (Esherick & Wasserstrom, 1990; Pye, 1990). To understand what was behind this traditionalism, Zhao (2000) compared the 1989 movement with the May 4th movement in 1919 and the December 9th movement in 1935/36 – the two largest student movements in republican China's history – and found that the rhetoric and activities used in the two earlier movements were much less traditional than those used during the 1989 movement. This is surprising because if movement activities are a simple reflection of cultural imprints, the rhetoric and activities of the two earlier movements would be more traditional because of the great cultural changes that China had experienced during the twentieth century. On this puzzle, Zhao (2000) argues that the less traditional forms of the two earlier student movements had much to do, among other factors, with a higher level of organizational involvement in the two movements. During the December 9th movement, for instance, after a student named Guo Qing was beaten and later died in jail, the students organized a memorial service at Peking University. During the service, a student suddenly jumped onto the stage and suggested carrying the coffin and demonstrating outside the

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university (funeral protest is a typical protest script in Chinese culture). Most students followed. However, the demonstrations met with head-on repression. Over a hundred students were wounded and fifty-three were arrested. If we follow the standard Chinese cultural scripts discussed by Pye (1990) in his analysis of the 1989 movement, we would expect the students to have staged activities to shame and out-moralize the authorities after this setback, and for the confrontation to have escalated. This did not happen, however, because by the time of this demonstration, the CCP North China Bureau headed by Liu Shaoqi had started to take control of the movement in Beijing, and the failure of this demonstration was taken as an opportunity to redirect the movement.[5] Liu Shaoqi criticized the funeral protest as ultra-leftist and reorganized the CCP Beijing Committee. The CCP North China Bureau also asked students to differentiate between the Nanjing government and that of the local military strongman Song Zheyuan, and raised slogans such as: 'Support the Chief of the Committee Song to lead the anti-Japanese resistance!' and 'Support the 29th Armed Forces to fight against the Japanese!' After the policy changes, the local government became more sympathetic to the students' cause and the movement ended in relative success.

This example shows that Chinese students indeed have had a tendency to follow culturally embedded forms of collective action during such movements. Yet it also shows the extent to which a well-organized movement was able to appropriate and change the cultural scripts for perceived benefits. The December 9th students were able to drastically change its orientation because the student movement was then controlled either by the CCP or the left-wing students who unconditionally followed the CCP's lead.

The above proposition can be stated in similar other ways when a social movement is poorly organized. Thus, we have the following corollaries:

> 1a. The less the roles that SMOs have played in a social movement, the more likely that the movement actors will adopt movement rhetoric and activities that follow closely the traditional cultural scripts.
>
> 1b. When a movement is very poorly organized and spontaneous activities dominate in the movement, culture will sometimes play its role in the movement in a way that shapes the behavior of the movement activists through their habits and taken-for-granted routines.

Here, the first corollary states another side of the same logic presented in the first proposition, and the second one can be seen as an extreme case derived from the first corollary. Both corollaries are based on an assumption that when a movement is poorly organized and spontaneous activities figure importantly in that movement, time, coordination and information for strategy making are all lacking and emotions tend run high. What the movement activists are more likely to do under this kind of situation is to follow what they are most familiar with or even to act on their instincts. The deep-seated cultural scripts in the minds of the actors and the taken-for-granted aspect of cultural life thus figure importantly. My reasoning here follows a well-established principle in social psychology, that is, when individuals act spontaneously in an emotional situation they tend to act out what they are most familiar with, to act according to those behavioral codes that have already been imprinted in their minds and to which they have become habituated

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(Triandis, 1989; Kitayama & Markus, 1994). Although the advocators of the political process models have overlooked the importance of emotions and spontaneity in social movements, they have reached a similar conclusion from another angle. As Tilly (1978, p. 155) puts it: 'flexible repertoire is the most general case for organized groups. The less organized the group, the more likely that the advantage-of-familiarity' types of behavior will dominate in a movement.

The above proposition and corollaries are all based on the conviction that leaders of an organization are more able to shelter themselves from the influence and pressure of the crowd mass, and that organizations have also more information and resources and are more able to coordinate to make meaningful decision making possible. These properties allow movement organizations to actively and creatively appropriate the existing cultural elements of a society for perceived benefits. Yet, it does not mean that individuals in a poorly organized social movement are unable to appropriate the cultural repertoire in a strategic manner. The problem is that when a movement is poorly organized, what we will see in that movement will not be a few coordinated actions initiated by movement organizers but most likely numerous spontaneous activities competing for the attention of the potential movement participants. Once a movement acquires such a mobilization structure, any kind of 'psychological engineering' of the potential movement participants by movement organizers, which is very well documented in Perry's (2002) analysis of the Chinese communist movement, becomes impossible. What determines the domination of certain rhetoric and activity patterns in a movement under such structural conditions is less the intention of the movement activists than the audiences' perception, which in turn is shaped by the shared interpretation schemes located in the brains of the audiences. The 'schemata of interpretations' here are no more than some kind of time-tested cultural values or scripts that the people in a society share. Therefore, even when some individuals act in highly strategic ways in a poorly organized movement, the outcome of the movement will still be driven by the dominant cultural scripts in the society. We have the following proposition:

2. When a movement is poorly organized, what determines the development of the social movement is not the nature of strategies or frames of the movement but the dominant 'schemata of interpretations' shared by the public.

The three mechanisms that link the cultural repertoire with patterns of social actions operate at different levels. Social actors are more able to appropriate the culture actively and creatively under the first mechanism, closely follow a certain cultural script they believe under the second mechanism, but can only act out a cultural script in a taken-for-granted fashion through instinct and habit under the third mechanism. Put differently, the role of culture in social actions becomes deeper and deeper from the first to the third mechanism. Since 'culture has more powerful effects where it is deeper – deeply internalized in individual psyches, deeply integrated into bodies and habits of action, or deeply embedded in taken-for-granted "mentalities"' (Swidler, 1995, p. 31), we thus state the mechanism embedded in the second proposition more explicitly as follows:

3. The impact of a society's dominant culture will be more pervasive and deterministic in a poorly organized than a well-organized movement.

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This proposition explains why many China specialists emphasize the importance of Chinese cultural traditions in the 1989 movement. They do so because China's traditional culture cut deeper in the 1989 movement than in many other social movements in China.

The above propositions and corollaries do not suggest that organizations always facilitate creative strategy making for the benefit of participants and the goals of a movement. Once well organized, movement organizers are also able to use the cultural tool-kits strategically for their own benefit and to foster hierarchical and oligarchic tendencies within the movement (Michels, 1962; Piven & Cloward, 1977). But, for better or for worse, better organized movements are more able to appropriate the existing culture in a strategic way. Some individuals in a poorly organized movement may act very innovatively in appropriating the existing culture, but their calculations tends to be poorly grounded and go in different directions, their efforts will be cancelled out by more script-driven and instinct-based activities, and the popular interpretation scheme in society will further act as a powerful selection mechanism that favors those activities congenial to the dominant cultural scripts. It seems to be for this reason that some American social movement scholars have advocated a new, less hierarchical style of movement organization for the purpose of avoiding the organization's oligarchic tendency and, in the meantime, maintaining the strategic efficiency that is characteristic of well-organized social movements (Polletta, 2002).

In her classic article on the relationship between culture and social action, Swidler (1986) discusses the mode of cultural influence under two kinds of structural conditions – unsettled and settled lives. Unsettled lives are understood as a social condition when the members of a society are inspired by new ideologies and ways of doing things, and settled lives as a condition when existing ideologies and cultural patterns dominate society. Swidler concludes that people tend to stick to and maintain the existing culture under settled lives and to follow new ideologies at the expense of the existing culture under unsettled lives even though they will still 'draw on many tacit assumptions from the existing culture' in their decision making (p. 177). Swidler's argument can be expanded by including in the concept of unsettled lives not only the prevailing of new ideologies but also other quick social changes brought by demographic crisis, industrialization, globalization, state-initiated reforms, etc. Nevertheless, the empirical logic that Swidler developed still holds after the conceptual extension. We thus have:

4. Under unsettled lives, movement actors are more able to actively and creatively appropriate the existing culture or even introduce new cultural elements in a strategic manner, while under settled lives the movement actors tend to follow familiar cultural scripts and the taken-for-granted assumptions to fight for their goals.

For social movements in the developing world, the mechanism revealed in this proposition works in the opposite direction to the organization mechanisms discussed above. That is, in most developing countries, social movements tend to be poorly organized as a result of the repressive political environment, but, at the same time, the lives in the developing world are highly unsettled because these countries are all compelled to get rid of many parts of their traditional culture to achieve a quick change toward modernity. Here, the movement may become 'script driven' or ritualistic owing to the movement's poorly organized nature, but the same environment also encourages

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strategic thinking or even radicalism in an unsettled environment. This is why the coexistence of radicalism and conservatism, and rationalism and traditionalism, has been a major feature of social movements in China as well as in other developing countries.

Another structural force that has a great impact on culture's role in social movements is the nature of the state. If we treat totalitarianism and democracy as two opposite ideal types of modern regimes, a totalitarian regime is naturally much more repressive than a democratic state toward independent organizational lives. Under a totalitarian regime, when a social movement is formed it is in general the result of serious political crises, and the movement tends to be more spontaneous and poorly organized. We can thus expand our first proposition to:

> 5. Movement actors are more able to treat the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit and to use culture scripts in a creative manner under a democratic state than a totalitarian regime.

This proposition is important for us to understand social movements in states that seriously restrict associational lives. Based on this proposition, we can conclude that, other factors being equal, a movement happening in a totalitarian regime tends to adopt rhetoric and activities that follow the traditional cultural scripts closely, the impact on the movement dynamics of the traditional culture of a society will be more pervasive and deterministic in a totalitarian regime (proposition 3), and the movement dynamics under a totalitarian regime are also determined more by the existing 'schemata of interpretations' in the minds of the people than by the strategies and intentions of the movement actors (proposition 2).

Needless to say, the above discussion assumes an ideal typical totalitarian regime. In the real world, we have post-totalitarian regimes with certain economic and political pluralism, authoritarian regimes with extensive socioeconomic pluralism and a space for organizations independent of the state, and cases where an authoritarian state is so weak that de facto pluralism exists in society (Linz & Stepan, 1996). The impact of the nature of the state on the patterns of social movements is not as simple and deterministic as the above proposition suggests. Therefore, when a movement in a post-totalitarian or authoritarian regime is able to base its mobilization on the available organizational frameworks, that movement is more likely to be less deterministically influenced by the traditional culture and is able to make strategic choices.

Since the mid-1990s, social movements organized by China's emergent NGOs and resourceful middle class have appeared on the political scene. These movements have stable resources and organizations, innovative frames initiated by movement organizers and savvy media strategies. They are also able to adopt both institutional and extra-institutional means to stage actions. They behave more like the movements present in the Western democratic regime than the more spontaneously initiated 1989 movement, thus showing the limitation of a kind of deterministic cultural analysis popular in the social sciences. Let me take two recent environmental movement cases to illustrate this point (Sun & Zhao, 2008).

In the last 20 years, the interests of China's central and local government have become differentiated. On environment issues, the central government tends to be more attuned to the issue, while local governments are more likely to sacrifice the environment for immediate economic benefits. Also during the same period, the Chinese government's

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control over the media was loosened. News items that expose the 'dark side' of Chinese society, provided they do not pose an immediate challenge to the authoritarian role, are now allowed to publish in the media. Beijing environmental NGOs explored these structured opportunities to the benefit of the movement.

Early in 1996, to stop the Deqin county government of Yunnan Province from logging the forest in the natural habitat of the endangered Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys, environmental NGOs in Beijing initiated a campaign later claimed to be the herald of China's green movement. They organized a student expedition team to Deqin to put pressure on the local government and to attract media attention. Meanwhile, they also appealed directly to the central government for support. Facing pressure from the media and the central government, the local government was forced to abort its logging scheme. After the success, Beijing environmental NGOs adopted similar strategies in other similar actions. In a more widely known campaign for saving the Tibetan antelope from commercially motivated poaching, the environmental NGOs allied with the media to gain societal attention, successfully petitioned the then Vice Premier Wen Jiabao to intervene in the issue in their favor, and gained enormous international support. In the end, the Chinese government not only recognized the environmental NGOs' efforts but also took their suggestion to foster multi-province coordination in fighting against the poaching of the antelope.

Here, I have no intention of denying that the activity patterns of Beijing environmental movements still inevitably inform Chinese culture and the environmentalists still draw from the Chinese cultural repertoire in making their decisions. Nevertheless, the organization-based learning processes and the creative use of the media and even the Chinese central government by the environmentalists contrasts sharply with the highly emotional, script-driven and taken-for-granted activities popular during the 1989 movement.

Movements acting in an authoritarian regime are also likely to copy the culture of authoritarianism even though the movement is fighting for democracy or other lofty goals. This is so for two reasons. The first is simply cultural imprint. An authoritarian regime, provided it is strong enough to affect people's daily lives through various socialization efforts, will make the authoritarian social routines the habit of the people. The second is a more active learning process. An authoritarian regime, when it is very repressive, will foster the rise of clandestine organizations and activities. Such an opposition movement tends to copy the authoritarian structure of the old regime and to follow and develop their strategies along the lines of an authoritarian culture that is at the core of the old regime's political scripts. This leads to the following proposition:

> 6. In a repressive authoritarian regime, even if a movement is well organized, the political culture of the old regime will lead a movement to develop strategies that follow the cultural scripts of the old regime.

After 1927, China's nationalist government started to purge the communists. To survive the 'white terror', the CCP went underground and remodeled itself into a highly authoritarian Leninist Party. The CCP was so tightly organized in the nationalist-controlled cities that it resembled a secret society (Byron & Pack, 1992). The leftist authoritarian culture that the CCP acquired in these earlier years had a huge impact that has lasted to this day. During the 1989 movement, for example, indoctrinated by the

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regime's authoritarian culture, Beijing students, having started a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, managed the square in a highly authoritarian manner (Zhao, 2001, Ch. 6). They smoked good cigarettes, drank good wines, and used the donated money to acquire various privileges. They also set up hierarchical organizations with each leader followed by multiple bodyguards. Finally, they established a very complicated picket line system to limit the free movement of the people around the square. The spirit of the regime's authoritarian culture haunted a protest that supposedly fought for democracy.

Discussion

This article argues that culture shapes social movement activities via three ideal-typical mechanisms: as tool-kits that protesters can employ strategically, as a script that inculcates protesters with shared values that guide their actions, and as instinct that molds protesters' action inadvertently. It then goes on to argue that although any concrete movement activity is likely to involve the working of all three mechanisms, with the relative importance of the three mechanisms in social movement changing with the structural conditions of a society. Finally, it proceeds to develop several propositions linking structural conditions and culture's different roles in social movements. At the center of the propositions is the argument that actors in a poorly organized social movement are more likely to follow certain cultural scripts or even their culturally embedded emotions and instincts, while actors in a well-organized movement are more able to take the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit to pursue the perceived benefits.

This article illustrates each ideal-typical cultural mechanism and proposition by one or two empirical examples drawn from Chinese experiences. Several readers of an earlier version of this article have questioned whether a few examples really prove my argument. This is a highly legitimate question that deserves special attention. Here, I would like to make it clear that the empirical examples in this article are not used for the purpose of proving my argument. In fact, for the following two reasons, empirical examples never prove anything in social sciences. First, such examples in social sciences are not supported by any logic similar to mathematical induction. That is to say, regardless of how many examples one has provided, they only strengthen but do not prove an argument in social sciences. Therefore, deduction as used by Olson (1965) to develop his free-rider problem is the only way in which one can really prove an argument. Second, even if we accept that a large number of empirical examples serve to strengthen an argument, there is another problem. For example, we may all agree that Olson's deductively derived free-rider problem has depicted an important mechanism. However, once we use any kind of empirical examples to show the working of this Olsonian mechanism, skeptical readers can always discredit the examples by asking whether the absence of collective action in the examples we have provided is indeed a result of the free-rider problem or whether it actually manifests other mechanisms such as the existence of strong repression, the lack of shared values in a group, and so on. This is exactly the reason why Olson's theory of collective action has been frequently challenged by empirically minded scholars (e.g. Fireman & Gamson, 1979; Ostrom, 1990). This example shows that while we can deduce the working of a specific social mechanism analytically, once we apply it to explain the dynamism of a particular empirical case, the application is very much prone to error. It is in part for this second reason that I decide to support this article's argument only by empirical cases that I am most familiar with, in order to make sure my examples are not

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going to be too far off the mark. In short, the empirical examples in this article are only intended to give readers a feel of the working of the ideal-type mechanisms and the propositions, not to provide proof for my argument.

In fact, to establish my argument, this article relies more on well-established research findings in sociology and social psychology. For example, when I made my core argument that the tool-kits aspect of culture is more important in a better organized social movement while the script and taken-for-granted routine aspect of culture is more important in a poorly organized social movement, I actually relied on three very well-developed research traditions – frame analysis, collective behavior studies and social psychological studies. Studying well-organized social movements under a democratic setting, frame analysis scholars all agree that social movement activities are the result of the 'strategic framing' of movement organizers. On the other hand, largely focused on the riots and spontaneously emerging protest activities popular in the USA before the 1960s, collective behavior scholars see shared understandings and emotional activities as the key in shaping the dynamics of riots or poorly organized social movements (Turner & Killian, 1987). Finally, it is an established principle in social psychology that individuals tend to act out what they are most familiar with – their habits – when they act spontaneously in an emotional situation. It might be easy to provide counter-empirical cases to oppose my argument (even though I suspect that the empirical cases that one has provided operate under very different structural conditions), but it is much more difficult to challenge the mechanisms that are well established in other research areas that support my argument.

That said, I must stress that this article is just a very preliminary step toward an explanatory cultural analysis. The propositions do not exhaust the patterns of relationships among social structure, culture and social actions, and the analysis of the article is elementary. I do hope, however, that the argument made in this article might inspire great works and real breakthroughs in the study of the relationships between culture and social action.

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Notes

1. Hu was the general secretary of the CCP (the Chinese Communist Party) in the 1980s. He was forced to resign in 1987 after being criticized in the party for his light-handed treatment of the student movement in 1986.
2. It is widely believed that Weber's concept of culture focuses on ideas and their impact on the action of individual actors, and Durkheim's culture concept locates culture in representations, rituals and symbols (Swidler, 1995, pp. 25–26). To me, they just emphasize different sides of the same coin. Being interested in social change, Weber needs to bring human agency into the analysis, but Durkheim's focus is on what makes society possible, and so he directs his attention to culture's collective and relational aspects.
3. Although cultural repertoire changes as the result of the improvisation, innovation and learning of the conscious actors, a society and its culture often develop not as the actors intended. Mistakes and unintended consequences weigh heavily in most social processes.
4. The existence of well-organized SMOs is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition that facilitates movement activists to treat the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit for their perceived benefits. As shown by the example of the early Chinese communist movement in the last section, once committed to a certain

ideology/culture, leaders of a well-organized movement will behave more or less according to the ideological/cultural script, which greatly narrows their strategy choice.

5. Liu was the president of China before the Cultural Revolution, and died during the Cultural Revolution after being purged from the CCP.

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