

POPULIST AUTHORITARIANISM

*Chinese Political Culture
and Regime Sustainability*



WENFANG TANG

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University of Iowa

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To my parents

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *xi*

1. Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability	1
Why Does Political Culture Matter?	2
Mass Line: The Origin of the Populist Authoritarian Political Culture	5
Primitive Accumulation of Social Capital in China	9
Political Culture in Post-Mao China	11
The Plan of the Book	12
Political Support: Local vs. Center	12
Regime Stability and National Identity	13
Social Capital	13
Political Trust in China and Taiwan	14
Protest and Regime Sustainability	14
Labor Dispute Resolution	14
Political Trust: An Experimental Study	15
Populist Authoritarianism: A Theoretical Discussion	15
Using Survey Data to Study Political Change in China	15
2. Authoritarian Regime Sustainability	20
The Coming Collapse of China: How Soon?	20
Modernization and Democracy	20
Regime Crisis	21
Regime Durability	23
Horizontal vs. Vertical Supports	26
How Satisfied and Happy Are the Chinese?	28
Government Dissatisfaction and Life Dissatisfaction	33
Public Anger, Political Action, and Democratic Change	36
Conclusions	39
3. Nationalism and Regime Sustainability	42
Theories of Nationalism	42
Nationalism in China	44

Sources of Chinese Nationalism	48
The Political Consequences of Chinese Nationalism	52
Conclusions	56
4. Interpersonal Trust and Regime Sustainability	58
The Puzzle	58
Interpersonal Trust and Democracy	61
Origins of Interpersonal Trust	63
Confucian Tradition	63
Socialist Legacy	63
Economic Growth and Marketization	64
Findings I: Classification of Interpersonal Trust	65
Three Types of Interpersonal Trust	66
Three Types of Trust and General Interpersonal Trust	67
Findings II: Trust and Political Attitudes and Behavior	69
Conclusions	73
5. Political Trust in China and Taiwan (with Joseph (Yingnan) Zhou and Ray Ou Yang)	74
What Is Political Trust?	74
Competing Theories of Political Trust	76
Political Mobilization	76
Economic Satisfaction	77
Internal Efficacy	77
External Efficacy	78
Confucian Tradition	79
Comparing China and Taiwan: Methods and Data	80
Measuring and Comparing Political Trust in China and Taiwan	82
Measuring and Comparing the Sources of Political Trust in China and Taiwan	85
Multivariate Analysis of Political Trust in China and Taiwan	90
Conclusion and Discussion	98
6. Regime-Inspired Contentious Politics	100
The Rise of Contentious Politics in China	100
The Contentious Politics Literature	101
Regime-Mobilized Contentious Politics in China	102
Institutional Deficiencies and Populist Authoritarianism	104
Examples of Regime-Mobilized Contentious Politics	106
Case Studies and Large- <i>N</i> Analysis	108
The Scope of Collective Action	108
Group Leaders	109

Regional Distribution	110	
Multivariate Analysis	112	
Central and Local Governments	114	
Targets of Group Action	115	
Unfair Treatment	115	
Age	115	
Education	116	
Gender	116	
Urbanization and Ethnicity	116	
Conclusions and Discussion	116	
7. Individual Dispute Resolution	118	
Scope and Type of Disputes	119	
Channels of Dispute Settlement	121	
Established Official Channels	121	
Emerging Institutional Channels	122	
Non-Institutional Channels	123	
Hypothetical and Actual Channels	123	
Socio-Economic Characteristics of Dispute Resolution	125	
Economic Organizations and the Politics of Dispute Resolution	127	
Conclusion and discussion	132	
8. Political Trust: An Experimental Study (with Yang Zhang)	134	
List Experiment	136	
Data and Methodology	137	
Findings	140	
Overt Measures	140	
Unobtrusive (Covert) Measures	141	
Who Hides Their Opinions?	143	
Robustness Check	145	
Conclusions and Discussion	150	
9. Populist Authoritarianism: A Preliminary Theoretical Discussion	152	
Key Components of the PA Model	152	
The Continuity of the Mass Line Ideology	152	
Social Capital and Interpersonal Trust	154	
Political Contention and Participation	155	
Weak Institutions	156	
The Hyper-Responsive Government	157	
Strong Political Support	159	
The PA Model and Civic Culture	161	

The PA Model and the BA State	162
The PA Model and the Existing Studies of Mass Politics	163
The PA Model and the Study of Comparative Politics	165
<i>Appendices</i>	167
<i>Notes</i>	191
<i>References</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	213

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In 1986 I took a course with professor Tang Tsou on the Chinese Communist movement as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. I wrote a paper about the Mass Line ideology and forgot about it. At the time, I thought that China was moving away from the radical revolutionary policy and toward a modern, rational, and rule-based stable bureaucratic society. Nearly 30 years later, amid the tremendous changes on the surface in Chinese politics and society, I kept seeing the continuity from China's recent political past. I found my Mass Line paper and reread the literature, which formed the foundation of chapter 1. I want to thank the late professor Tang Tsou, whose broad vision and comprehensive understanding of the nature of Chinese politics encouraged me to study contemporary Chinese politics with a historical perspective.

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CHAPTER 1

Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability

In 2013, the residents of a community in the city of Xiamen protested and demanded additional compensation from a land transfer legal agreement that was signed 24 years prior between the community and a golf club owned by overseas investors. The protesters released their anger against local authorities by injuring several police. They also decided to publicly humiliate a female district government official by stripping her topless and making her stand on her knees and apologize to the public for not serving their needs. As a result, the district government allegedly agreed to build new roads and bridges, as well as a garbage processing center for the community. None of the protesters was arrested.¹

Such a scene is almost a daily occurrence in today's China, leading many observers to believe that such events indicate the increasing possibility of democratization and the declining popularity of the Chinese authoritarian government. These observers seem to forget another, equally well-known fact in the post-Mao Chinese political life—the strong public support for the Communist Party by the majority of people in all walks of Chinese society. Why and how these two seemingly contradictory trends coexist and interact with each other in contemporary Chinese politics require further theoretical and empirical analysis.

The event in Xiamen exemplifies several important features that are characteristic of Chinese political life. It shows a regime operating in the ideological tradition of Mass Line that directly connects the state with the public, often bypassing administrative regulations and the legal procedure, resulting in weak institutions and civic organizations. The state often encourages the public to participate in local politics in an effort to correct unpopular policies and purge incompetent officials. Consequently, the mass public demonstrates a high level of political activism

and is eager to confront local authorities and engage in contentious political behavior. Such high-risk behavior, which may be subject to local government retribution, is reinforced by a high degree of interpersonal trust, which is a product of community solidarity nourished under socialist central planning. In an authoritarian political system where competitive elections are missing, the government struggles to maintain its political legitimacy by responding to public demand more quickly than in an electoral cycle. All of these phenomena explain the high degree of regime support at the Center.

In the remaining chapters, I develop a preliminary theory of populist authoritarianism, which includes the following elements: the Mass Line ideology, strong interpersonal trust and rich social capital, individual political activism and political contention, weak political institutions and an underdeveloped civic society, an often paranoid and highly responsive government, and strong regime support. While such a theory of Chinese political culture can explain how and why the seemingly conflicting components are holding together for the time being, it cautions that such a process is highly unstable due to the lack of institutional guarantee.

This chapter discusses the historical and institutional context of the evolving Chinese political culture. Any discussion of “Chinese culture” can easily go back to the dynastic history. The focus of this chapter, however, is the political culture that was formed during the Chinese Communist movement in the early 20th century and continued to evolve after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized political power in 1949.

WHY DOES POLITICAL CULTURE MATTER?

The concept of culture can be defined as social and psychological orientations. It is a “data container” including symbols, ideas, beliefs, norms, customs, knowledge, values, and attitudes (Sabetti 2007). Almond and Verba defined political culture as “the psychological or subjective orientations toward politics” (Almond and Verba 1963). Before examining political culture in China, it is necessary to establish political culture as a worthy subject for research. Political culture needs to assert itself against at least three sources of competition: institutionalism, rationalism, and ethnosymbolism. First, institutionalism believes that political institutions, not individual attitudes and values, determine political outcome (Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1996a, 1996b; Tsebelis 2002; Rhodes, Binder, and Rockman 2008). While an institutional environment sets important parameters and constraints for individual behavior, political actors’ personal beliefs still lead to different outcomes. It is not difficult to find examples of different

political leaders occupying the same institutional post but producing different policy outcomes.

Second, rationalism downplays the importance of individual beliefs, feelings, and emotions. It argues that people make political decisions based on information gathering and the calculation of benefit and cost (Rowgowski 1976; Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000). The study of political culture shares two things in common with rationalism. First, both stress the importance of individual political actors, their motivation, and their behavior. Second, both believe that individual motivation and behavior can be measured objectively, either through surveys, focus group studies, or lab experiments.

One problem for the rationalist view is its assumption that people can process information and take actions that lead to the optimal ratio between cost and benefit. Yet some studies show that people are not really capable of making objective decisions by using newly gathered information. Instead, new information is selectively used to reinforce people's preconceived beliefs (Taber, Lodge, and Glatha 2001; Lodge and Taber 2005). Further, voters who are given all the necessary information may make worse decisions than those who don't have the information but use their intuition instead (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). There is simply too much information, and it is too complicated to process.

A number of rational choice scholars have recognized this problem of information flooding. They introduced the idea of "bounded rationality" in which people take shortcuts to make "low-information" decisions (Elster 1983; Simon 1991; Popkin 1991). They seem to think that people are rational as long as they make self-satisfying decisions based on stereotypes, political ideology, consensus, and so on. By emphasizing the importance of these subjective orientations, however, these rationalist scholars are also suggesting the necessity of studying political culture.

The third challenge to the study of political culture using public opinion survey data comes from ethnosymbolism. Ethnosymbolism is best articulated by Clifford Geertz in his anthropological study of cultures (Geertz 1973) and is also advocated by some political scientists (Eckstein 1988; Laitin and Wildavsky 1988). At the core of ethnosymbolism is the assertion that cultures are represented by their symbols, such as languages, religions, rituals, and historical narratives. Understanding these symbols through participant observation and ethnography is crucial in studying how culture influences political outcome (Laitin and Wildavsky 1988). Ethnosymbolists are highly suspicious that subjective cultural orientations can be detected by public opinion survey questions. For them, the same concept or action can mean different things in different cultural

contexts (Geertz 1973). For example, a survey question about interpersonal trust cannot detect the meaning of trust in different cultures, which can vary from trusting family members, community members, to strangers. Neither do the ethnosymbolists think countries can or should be compared based on survey questions (Eckstein 1988). For them, comparing the percentages of people who trust other people in different societies simply misses the variation in interpersonal trust between different subcultures within a country.

While ethnosymbolism makes important contributions in showing that subjective cultural orientations are linked to political actions and in expressing its well-founded concerns about the accuracy of survey data, relying exclusively on the ethnosymbolist notion is likely to run into several problems. First, cultural symbols can be overly interpreted, and universal human experiences are often overlooked. In the Chinese context, for example, the concepts of *guanxi* (relationship or personal network) and *mianzi* (saving face or pride) have been described as cultural symbols that carry particular importance in Chinese culture (Yang 1994; Mann 2000). Yet it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the necessity of personal networks and the need to satisfy one's pride can be found in any society, not only in China. Dwelling on such cultural symbols like *guanxi* and *mianzi* makes China seem unique and difficult to compare with other societies, while the meanings of these symbols are universal and can be easily compared across countries.

Further, relying on cultural stereotypes can blind the researcher from recognizing the diversity and the changing reality in a society. For example, the concept of *guanxi* may no longer capture the reality in China when more formal rules are developed during rapid economic growth.

Another problem with the overemphasis on cultural symbols is to overlook the outcome. Sometimes people in different cultures do different things or use different symbols to achieve the same outcome. For example, people show their agreement by shaking their heads in India, and nodding in China. Focusing on the difference in this case is a waste of time if one's research interest is whether people agree or disagree, regardless of whether they do so by nodding or shaking their heads.

Finally, while the ethnosymbolists' early criticism of survey research methodology is valid, such methodology has made tremendous progress since the 1970s. Survey researchers are capable of drawing more representative national samples in a large number of countries, which makes it possible not only to compare countries but also to examine the variation between subgroups within a country. In addition, survey researchers have developed more detailed measures of concepts than before. For example, they now ask people not only whether they trust each other but also

the specific type of people they trust, such as their family, community, or strangers. Further, the same surveys have been repeated over time, allowing the researchers to approach their topics from a historical perspective as well as at a cross-section of time. Finally, survey researchers have made exciting progress in tackling the difficult problems of respondent truthfulness and establishing causal links between survey questions by embedding experiments in representative surveys. In short, even though the survey method still has many problems, it has the undeniable advantage of drawing conclusions based on representative samples that enjoy a level of generalizability superior to the ethnographic method that relies on in-depth case studies.

Following the tradition of political socialization and psychology (Almond and Verba 1963; Dahl 1966; Almond 1989, 1990; Lane 1992; Jennings 2007; Shi 2015), this study takes a behaviorist approach and holds that beliefs, feelings, and values play important roles in shaping political behavior and political outcomes. These beliefs, feelings, and values are the results of political socialization, as well as social and economic changes in a society. A particular political culture is a specific configuration of these beliefs, feelings, and values.

Political culture can be concretely defined and measured by a set or “rubric” (Reisinger 1995) of concepts that should be able to travel across country borders. These concepts include one’s identity to the country and/or to one’s own community, the level of confidence in political institutions, the relative importance between individual interest and group interests, respect for authority and the law, relationships with other people (trust and tolerance), belief in the modes and consequences of conflict resolution and political participation, and so on. These concepts are widely measured in the cross-country public opinion surveys such as the World Values Surveys (WVSs), the surveys conducted by the International Social Science Programme, and the Chinese public opinion surveys used in this book (more on those later).

MASS LINE: THE ORIGIN OF THE POPULIST AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Contemporary Chinese political culture is shaped by the theory of the Mass Line. The term “Mass Line” (*qunzhong luxian*) was first used by Li Lisan, a Communist Party leader, in a speech in 1928 (Han and Ji 2013). It served as a powerful theoretical and organizational principle for political mobilization by the CCP during the Communist movement in the first half of the 20th century. The theory of the Mass Line was most clearly articulated

by Mao in 1943. In the article “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership,” Mao writes:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses.” This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of such ideas in action. (Mao 1967, 119)

The key phrase in Mao’s statement is “from the masses, to the masses” which assumes a close and direct relationship between the Party and the masses, or between political power and society (Tsou 1986, 290). This direct relationship requires both accessible elites and available non-elites if it is to exhibit a high rate of mass behavior and elite–mass interaction.

The Mass Line bears certain similarities to the mass society described by Kornhauser in his study of social movement and state-building in the West. In a mass society, according to Kornhauser, elites are accessible and non-elites are available in that there is a lack of independent groups between the state and the family. In the absence of social autonomy at all levels of society, large numbers of people are pushed and pulled toward activist modes of intervention in vital centers of society; and mass-oriented leaders have the opportunity to mobilize this activism for the capture of power (Kornhauser 1959, 41).

In China, the Communist Party weakened and even destroyed the traditional intermediate groups such as the rural gentry class and landowners, and it relied on the Mass Line as a method of political mobilization to win over the popular support by the peasantry and eventually defeated the Nationalist government in 1949.

The CCP’s populist orientation continued after 1949. It was so effective for the CCP to gain political power that it continued to rely on the Mass Line in state-building, government policy making, economic development, and social restructuring. From 1949 to 1976, Mao and his followers in the CCP launched a series of political campaigns in order to consolidate the communist regime and promote social and economic development. One such campaign was the People’s Commune Movement, launched in 1958, in which agricultural production was collectivized and rural communities played important roles in social, economic, and political life, partially replacing the role of the traditional family. Another important campaign was the Great Leap Forward Movement in 1958. Mao and other radical leaders of the CCP believed that the Mass Line could be

used to promote China's industrial development by mobilizing the public enthusiasm rather than relying on the educated elites.

The most extreme mass political campaign in the early years of the post-1949 Communist regime was the Great Proletariat Culture Revolution, which lasted from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976. The Cultural Revolution was a massive social and political movement. Mao and his followers bypassed and destroyed the intermediate bureaucratic institutions and professional organizations and attempted to reach and mobilize the very bottom of Chinese society in order to achieve economic growth and social and political egalitarianism.

Some observers see the totalitarian nature of the Mass Line. For example, Graham Young argues that Party leadership is central in the conception of the Mass Line, in which the Party must provide the policy guidance at all levels and over all areas of activity of state and society, and the Party's policy can be effected only through Party leadership (Young 1980). In his study of the Communist movement in eastern and central China from 1937 to 1945, Y. Chen (1986) contends that the Mass Line is merely the Party's "techniques of controlled polarization" between the peasant and landlord classes. By drawing a sharp line and by intensifying the tension between the two classes, the CCP was able to mobilize the peasant class and successfully destroy its potential rivalry—the traditional rural elites, and eventually rely on the support of the rural masses in defeating the Nationalist Party in the civil war. In short, the essence of the Mass Line is a relationship between the CCP as the manipulator and the masses as the manipulated.

Other scholars, however, see the empowerment of society under the Mass Line. For example, Meisner (1978) observed that under the socialist economic system, the Mass Line is ideally accompanied by the formation of more and more self-governing communities of producers. Politically, these "associations of producers" are capable of standing up against bureaucratic or political hierarchies, while at the same time recognizing their own interests that also tend to enhance the overall development of the society. Effective adaptation of the Mass Line may require political activism within grass-roots communities, which enhances solidarity, enthusiasm, and broadened awareness of social goals. It can also mobilize and strengthen community power in relation to higher political or bureaucratic authorities (Meisner 1978). Therefore, it is at the community level where the democratic nature of the Mass Line is realized.

Others describe the Mass Line as a democratic decision-making process (Blecher 1979). In the spirit of the Mass Line, statements on policy put forward by local leaders would not be regarded as final decisions or

firm directives but as provisional formulations which the masses would be able to discuss, clarify, modify, or reject. Moreover, the masses could also influence the policy by their decisions about specification or implementation. A process of this sort could be described as the politics of consensus in which formal voting would be unnecessary (Blecher 1979, 109).

According to Blecher, the existence of this process of consensus politics can be proven by the facts that policy directives are generally clearer about the goals than the concrete forms; that new policies undergo considerable testing before promulgation; the frequency of “summing-up,” “consolidation,” and “rectification” campaigns at the mass level; and the frequent shifts of direction and emphasis in Chinese policy. These facts are all consistent with the Mass Line view that policy decisions are always somewhat provisional, subject to revision according to the masses’ objections, suggestions, and interpretation (Blecher 1979, 108–109). Therefore, under the Mass Line, mass participation and influence are extensive and substantive. Angle compares democratic centralism—the guiding principle of the Mass Line, with Rawls’ “decent society” (Rawls 1999, 64–66), in which people are rational, responsible, cooperative participants of social and political life (Angle 2005, 521).

While the Mass Line seems to resemble a democratic style of leadership, it is fundamentally different from liberal democracy. Liberal democracy consists of an elaborate set of institutions and game rules to implement the principle of “consent of the governed” and to compel rulers to take into account the interests, wants, preferences, and aspirations of the citizens more fully than under other forms of government (Tsou 1986, 271–272). On the other hand, the Mass Line is different from totalitarianism. Totalitarianism focuses on the total control of society by the state, while the Mass Line can be described as “totalist politics” which is built on the full-scale interaction between the state and society (Tsou 1986).

Another key difference between a mass society and a civil society is the role of social organizations. In a civil society, these organizations enjoy autonomy and the freedom from state control. In a mass society like China, social organizations such as trade unions, political parties, professional associations, and NGOs are co-opted under the same principle of democratic centralism (Salmenkari 2010).

Regardless the debate about whether the Mass Line embodies democratic or totalitarian nature of governance, it is undeniable that it profoundly shaped the political culture in contemporary Chinese society. Inherent in the Mass Line ideology are its three key components: (1) a direct link between the state and society with minimum interference of intermediate organizations and institutions, (2) a thorough mobilization

of the masses in political participation, and (3) an implicit concept of social contract in which the elites serve the interest of the masses who in return grant political support for the state.² As is shown later in this chapter, the Mass Line continues to serve as a linkage between the state and society in the post-Mao Chinese political culture and a powerful instrument for political mobilization and regime legitimacy.

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CHINA

While the Mass Line provided the political capital for the CCP's rule, the radical social and economic transformation in the early years of the socialist regime produced the social capital that became an important part of the Chinese political culture.

Marx (1867) used to describe the early stage of capitalism as a process of primitive accumulation of capital in which the capitalists acquired the means of production by force, such as the enclosure of land by capitalists in England. This process laid the foundation for the later development of the capitalist economic system. To use a similar metaphor, one can see the early stage of the communist regime in China as a process of the primitive accumulation of social capital which in turn laid the foundation for its political rule. After the Communists defeated the Nationalists in 1949, the new regime attempted to establish an egalitarian society under the dictatorship of the CCP. In their pioneer studies based on interviews with Chinese immigrants in the 1970s, William Parish and Martin Whyte detail the CCP's effort to build such an egalitarian society in rural and urban China. According to their studies (Parish and Whyte 1978; Whyte and Parish 1984), this equalitarianism is represented by public ownership of land, reduction of the role of the family, and the promotion of social equality.

The CCP first abolished private ownership of land, and collectivized both agricultural and industrial productions, in the 1950s. During the radical years of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the traditional role of family as the basic economic unit was weakened by the expansion of social services, such as public education, employment security, public health care, and pension programs. Social services drastically reduced parental influence and promoted equal access to education and employment, and greater equality in household income distribution. Although some traditional practices in gender discrimination persisted, the expansion of social services further promoted gender equality in education, female labor force participation, reduced fertility rates, improved