

Modern China

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

Rule as Repertory and the Compound Essence of Authority

Vivienne Shue

Modern China 2008; 34; 141

DOI: 10.1177/0097700407308132

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/1/141>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Modern China* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mcx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Rule as Repertory and the Compound Essence of Authority

Vivienne Shue
Oxford University

These brief comments reflect on several of the interrelated themes that are raised in the various articles featured in this issue, including (1) their acknowledgement of the synthetic, always-plural techniques of rule that, both historically and today, are available for deployment within the Chinese political system at any one time; (2) that powerfully informing and often-recurring ideal of governance in China that privileges a seamless blending and mixing of state with society and of formal institutions with informal practices; and (3) that consequently still-frustrating difficulty, so often experienced by serious contemporary scholars and writers in the China field who understand they must seek to, but may never quite manage fully to, transcend such quintessentially “modern” and now, therefore, equally profoundly informing conceptual binaries as state versus society, formal versus informal, thought versus practice, and representative democracy versus authoritarianism.

Keywords: *China; state and society; governance; informal; authoritarianism*

Reflecting on the special characteristics of the Chinese state—from the deep past to the present and from rather widely differing scholarly perspectives—the authors of the five main articles grouped together in this issue concur, or so it seems to me, on at least a handful of important observations. These scholars tend to underscore repeatedly in their work that, in form, the Chinese state’s authority is, and perhaps from earliest times it always has been, constructed as unitary. That is, authority is conceived as having been delegated from above and as deriving ultimately from a single, exceedingly centralized source on high. Yet in their day-to-day performance of the arts of governance, our authors insist, state actors in the Chinese system, like actors in any good repertory company, have rarely if ever been able to adhere to some single, uniform, or preselected script for rule.¹ They have had habitually, instead, to be prepared to play a rather flexible set of roles and to deploy, at any given time, quite an extensive array of often seemingly dissimilar techniques of rule to suit diverse interests, changing

tastes, and pressing demands. In China, the *idea* of state authority is then, perhaps, always singular, transcendent, and universal; the *realization* of rule, however, is always plural, rooted, and particular. The scholarly tasks entailed in capturing the authentic sounds of all those plural voices and in analyzing the elaborate interplay of all those plural forms that state authority can assume are approached, not unexpectedly, from some rather different directions in the articles selected here.

Kang and Han on Modulating Controls

Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng come at the problem from a political–organizational perspective that permits them to construct an elaborate typology of “graduated controls” they see as being deployed very deliberately by state actors to govern differently over different components in society. Adopting a language and a social perspective that equates the problem of governance with that of threat management and social control and extrapolating on the familiar logic of maximizing benefits to the state and minimizing costs, they envision and then illustrate some five grades of governmental control “strategies” applied to eight “types” of social organizations. Modulating controls in this way—this particular technique of rule—they argue further, appeared in China only in the 1990s, when the “authoritarian” government, because of its “dominant position . . . in the state–society relationship” came to possess “precisely the right capability . . . to carry out reform as it wished.” In this conception, as they develop it here, all energy and agency in the state–society relationship would appear to belong to the state. The threats different sorts of social groups may present to the state and the benefits they may, on the other hand, have to offer to the state are presented as simply self-evident, or ascribed by definition. And social organizations, on their account, would appear to have no recourse but to accept the particular state controls that are applied to them. The plural forms of governance—strategies or techniques of rule—that Kang and Han enumerate, therefore, spring entirely from the state’s own agenda, indeed from the state’s own need, to achieve the most economical and the most perfect possible mechanisms for social capture and opposition management.

Wang Shaoguang on Interactive Processes and Congruence

Wang Shaoguang, by contrast, approaches the problem of plural forms of authority and plural types of state–society relations from the perspective

of political participation, representation, policy decision making, and the politics of agenda setting. His analysis is aimed ultimately at throwing doubt on the very usefulness (anymore) of what he regards as the too-promiscuously employed category of the “authoritarian state.” His analysis is aimed also at countering what he sees as the “conventional wisdom in the West” that while economic reform has proceeded rapidly, no real political reform has yet to take place in China. Wang posits six types of interactive relationships that can exist between state and society and can be deployed, not mutually exclusively, in generating and governing the social policy-making agenda. He finds examples of all six in Chinese state practice, as it has evolved over time. He points particularly to the recent emergence of “popular pressure” as a factor in government agenda setting and discusses the changing role of the contemporary media in both expressing popular opinion and focusing the public’s attention and state actors’ attention on certain policy-making issue areas as opposed to others.

In Wang’s vision, the techniques of governance available to and actually deployed by the state are then, once again, multiple. Any currently existing equilibrium among these techniques is not, however, presented as a fixed or static one but as one that is very much changing before our eyes. Even as formal authority undoubtedly remains highly centralized in China, all human agency that conduces to policy change is not seen by Wang as resting with or in the state alone. Social organizations, furthermore, and “the public” are not pictured as merely neutralized or powerless to oppose; they are not even necessarily particularly submissive. Governing effectively, to be sure, entails the deliberate selection and application of specific techniques of rule from among those already stored (as tried-and-true historical and cultural legacies) within the broad repertoire of scripts for rule available to any given state. But the art of governing, Wang seems to argue, also frequently requires state actors to do some nimble improvisation—to relinquish certain older routines, to initiate new types of reciprocal processes linking state and society, or to re-route already ongoing reciprocal processes of exchange and interaction that are perceived to be headed on a dangerous course. It is through such visibly changing processes of state–society interaction, Wang indicates, that real policy outcomes are produced in China today, policy outcomes in which “the priorities of the public” and the “priorities of the Chinese government” may achieve either greater or lesser degrees of congruence.

Wang Shaoguang’s interest in the possibility that the degree of “congruence” between state priorities and public priorities may be expanded or improved over time is worth some careful consideration. To hold such “congruence” between state and public priorities up as a goal—one already

on its way, perhaps, to partial fulfillment—is to suggest some probability that a Chinese pathway toward more complete, more efficient popular representation may eventually be beaten out through the underbrush of continuous, expanded political discussion and debate; a pathway that would have to be trodden out via countless repeated processes of state–society accommodation over time; a pathway that would not track that other course, the course that leads, rather, not in pursuit of more comfy–cozy congruity but toward sharply competitive multiparty politics and the extension of direct popular sovereignty.

Sun Liping on Theory and Practice

Sun Liping approaches the problem of analyzing state authority and state–society relations in China, and how these now are changing, from the perspective of political sociology. He provides his own rapid summaries of, and records his dissatisfactions with, a number of previous attempts made by good, hard-working social scientists to develop general theories of social change. These he groups, for purposes of critique, under the familiar broad rubrics of “modernization theory” and “dependency theory.” Such approaches as these do not work well for thinking about the Chinese case, he maintains, and he calls for the construction of a new theory to replace them, one better suited to analyzing the specific opportunities and dilemmas of post-socialist “transition.” The transition to modernity in post-socialist societies, Sun asserts, must differ importantly from what have been mistakenly seen as similar transitions experienced in other societies—both those in societies that industrialized early and those in societies that began the struggle for economic development later on, in the post-colonial era. In both those other types of cases, the social experiences of “modernizing” and “developing” (or, indeed, the experiences of remaining “underdeveloped”), he observes, occurred contemporaneously with and tended to converge with the social experiences of nation building and state building. In what we used to call the “first world” and the “third world,” modern states and modern economies rose, or are still rising, together—at the same time and as parts of the same, transformative social processes. In the so-called second world, however—that is, today’s “post-socialist” societies, including China—Sun suggests that the transformative process must be very different. For, as the economy is being built, the state—already presumably too much with us—must be un-built. And as for Chinese society, it must and will be entirely “re-built.”

Sun goes on to review some attempts at theorizing post-socialist transition that have already been sketched out by scholars working on Russia or on cases drawn from Eastern and Central Europe. These more recent efforts at theory building, like the earlier ones, he again finds wanting. For in China, unlike the countries of the former Soviet bloc, the Communist Party–state has remained continuously in power during the transition, while new social elites have been generated and have risen, but only gradually under conditions not of “shock therapy” but of “gradual market reform.” The persistence of Communist Party rule and the relatively measured pace of economic reform, he warns, have made the political sociology of China’s transition vastly different from those transitions taking place in Europe.

Only at the very end of his article does Sun offer any of his own insights and advice to readers on a way forward for theorizing state–society relations in post-socialist transition. There are, he suggests, two very special characteristics of the Chinese reform process—“two strategies” that have been adopted by “the reformists”—that deserve our studious attention. One of these concerns *formal thought*, or Chinese state ideology. The other concerns *informal practice*, social practice that originates in the skills and everyday tactics used by common people trying to make the most of their situation and to get along.

First, at the level of official political thought and social philosophy, China’s reformists have managed to refrain from counterposing “the market” and its values to “socialism” and its values in a way that must provoke a systemic choice between the two. They have instead, very gradually but deliberately, worked to obscure and blur the boundaries between the two, moving to incorporate concepts and social values associated with “the market” into the official ideology of the still-“socialist” state. Second, China’s reformists have been very adept at what in common parlance is wittily referred to as “signaling left while turning right.” That is, great latitude has de facto been allowed for officially unsanctioned, even officially forbidden, economic, cultural, and other activities to be carried on in society without state interference, but also without public acknowledgement of their existence. In this way, “informal”—technically often illicit and certainly politically incorrect—practices that everyone knows about but no one admits to or publicly comments on are given an opportunity to prove what social utility they may have so that eventually, when people who would initially have been hostile to them have become less alarmed and more accepting, these reformist practices can be embraced by the state and dignified with formal approvals.²

Many institutional departures and procedural innovations in both economy and society that were required for market reform to take hold and

develop first emerged sub rosa as popular shortcuts, rule stretching and intentional misinterpretation of rules, chronic cheating at the margins, or ethically very questionable social experiments permitted nonetheless to proceed by sympathetic Party and government personnel prepared to take some risks. If such tolerant officials were eventually forced by economic or political circumstances to abandon one of their sub rosa “experiments” and operations, they could always claim (as in that oft-quoted line from *Casablanca*) to be “Shocked, shocked! to discover that gambling could go on in Rick’s café.” If, on the other hand (and as more often proved to be the case) such informal adaptations were never actually shut down, then they could (and very likely would), at some later stage in the transition, be blessed and sanctioned with formal state acceptance, approval, and even official promotion for general adoption around the region or the country at large.

Taking his inspiration from Bourdieu at last, Sun advocates that, for theory building about the social transitions that are underway, we should start by making close studies of actual *practice* and that we should look especially at the skills and strategies of common people. One of the basic facts of political life in China is that the gap between what happens in theory and what happens in practice is very, very wide. Thus, for Sun Liping, the repertory for rule and the real techniques of governance that can and have been deployed in China’s present post-socialist transition are decidedly not pre-scripted but open ended. They are profoundly plural and flexible and most often consciously crafted to be so by those in positions of authority. They may even include dramatic state silences, or calculated intimations of “un-rule,” or gestures in favor of “non-governance.” For Sun as well, however, recognizing and appreciating the “agency” that is displayed by ordinary people and the ripple effects of their countless, cumulated, clever adaptations to the great changes going on around them must be made a central motif in analyzing and in narrating the story of social transition in China. And for this purpose, approaching the problem from the binary perspective of distinguishing *formal* institutions from *informal* ones and *formal* speech from *informal* behaviors, and so on, seems quite promising to him.

Philip Huang on Paradox and Power

Like Sun Liping, Philip Huang, in his review of recent scholarship on local governance in the Qing and his discussion of its legacies and possible lessons to be drawn from it for later times, also advocates the close study of real practices—real administrative practices—if we wish to comprehend the

nature of state authority in China.³ “We must distinguish between the formal structures of government and the operational realities of governance, between governmental institutions and administrative practice,” he writes. Like Sun also, Huang makes heavy use of the distinction between formal and informal institutions while making his case that the Qing state’s “basic approach to governance— . . . acting only after complaints and . . . relying as much as possible on informal and semi-formal processes—was applied . . . not only in the civil justice system but widely throughout Qing local administration.” This general mode of governance in the lower reaches of the polity relied crucially on unsalaried “quasi officials” to keep the peace and dispense tolerable justice in what Huang stresses remained essentially an agrarian empire. The accumulated contributions of these countless local “semiformal” social actors spread out all over the realm, who could be depended on to have close familiarity with people and conditions in their communities, made possible the sustained achievement of what Huang sees as the Qing’s rather paradoxical ideal of good governance, which he here dubs “centralized minimalism.” Professor Huang has a fascination for what he regards as paradoxical combinations such as this one, and he raises several for discussion in this essay: the paradoxical combination of patrimonialism with bureaucratization first conceived by Max Weber, for one; of high despotic power with low infrastructural power first conceived by Michael Mann; of Confucianism with Legalism; of high levels of village community solidarity with relatively deep penetration by the state into subcounty administration (in certain rural communities in the late Qing and the Republican period); even of Party–state “totalism” with semiformal rural governance under Mao.

Incongruously hybrid, internally seemingly self-contradictory ideals and systems of governance such as these, which as it happens keep recurring in Chinese social practice, seem to present an engrossing analytical and descriptive challenge for Huang. He generates, therefore, a number of different concepts and appellations in the effort to capture how, and even exactly *where* (in an abstract spatial sense), people participating in governance activity at the bottom of these systems did their work. He speaks thus of an “overlapping, collaborative sphere of governance” lying “between state and society,” of a “zone lying between formal government and informal society,” of “a third realm . . . midway between the formal state apparatus of the county yamen and the informal mediatory mechanisms of society.” This realm was inhabited by persons holding a “semiformal” or “quasi-official” status. It was a “gray area,” a “vast sphere” in which “the ‘state’ (e.g., the formal bureaucratic apparatus) and ‘society’ (e.g., the village) . . . overlapped and worked in tandem.” Huang has taken considerable pain

over the years of his deepening research into the question to delineate this special “space” in the Chinese polity and detail the work of governance that took place there, in a sustained scholarly effort to extend our powers of conceptualization “beyond the confines of a simple dichotomous binary,” that is, the state versus society, formal versus informal binary.

Here I would like to suggest, however, that, in general, apparently paradoxical social phenomena only seem paradoxical and self-contradictory to us because they originate in too-simple, ideal-typical, or dichotomous formulations that still heavily structure and haunt our own thought. Recasting the problem of formal versus informal to allow for action that is “semiformal” seems literally only to split the difference between the two halves of the binary rather than to bridge or to erase it. And to think in terms of a “third realm,” lying in between the civil and the official realms, one in which “quasi officials” operate, seems only to install in space the conceptual separation that, we all agree, we require be overcome.

Perhaps no one in the China studies field has more eloquently expressed the “joining” of state with society that we see occurring so frequently in the Chinese experience of governance than Prasenjit Duara, in the elaboration of his concept of the “cultural nexus of power.” For Duara (1988: 25), the nexus is not a place but a framework of institutions, practices, and beliefs circulating within which elements of state and society are mingled, each gaining scope and power from their mutual association, one with the other; a framework within which authority, acquired through association with other persons of influence, power, and prestige who operate in diverse spheres of human affairs, can thereby be generated or reconfirmed and where the efficacy of state and society can be both symbolically and actually joined.

If the somewhat mysterious transfer and creation of authority by association Duara evokes should still seem difficult to grasp, I might suggest more simply myself that the essence of this mode for generating authority in the Chinese context might be better captured if we selected a still more fluid metaphor to express it. I think we will do better to think of the ideal of state–society relations in China not as an arena or a space or even as a framework or a channel or a link or a join but as a *compound*, an admixture of unlike elements that can become a blend, an amalgam in which the original separate components have lost their distinctness. The compound I sometimes use to assist in visualizing this process of blending the elements of state and of society is one associated with the art of calligraphy. When dry ink is ground in the inkstone and water is added, each of the unlike elements lends something of itself to the other, each is infused with the other, and the immediate potency of both elements is enhanced as a new compound is created.

With this new compound—this quickened amalgam of the wet and the dry, of the colorless and the colorific—skilled hands can create objects of great beauty, the generative powers of artists and writers may be expressed, and their sway over others may be achieved. Like the art of calligraphy, the art of governing well, as it has been conceived in the mind of many a Chinese thinker and statesman one suspects, rests first on perfecting the skill of blending and mixing the formal with the informal, of blending and mixing state and society together—just as one blends and mixes the ink.

Wang Hui on the Plurality of the Polity

In his extraordinary article printed here, Wang Hui has little directly to say about the problem of state and society. He is grappling primarily with several other equally fierce double-headed conceptual demons, among them the dichotomous binary of “empire versus nation-state.” Therefore, in the context of the particular themes I have chosen to develop in these comments so far, I would highlight just one of the many important points that emerge from Wang’s work—his emphasis on the multiterritorial, multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious nature of the Qing system of rule. Governing in Qing times was an exercise in accommodating a host of “pluralistic identities and pluralistic political/judicial systems within the empire system.” The emperor himself “embodied a synthesis” of several identities, governing as he did over Han peoples, Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans, Muslims, local chieftains in the southwest, and various other tributaries around the periphery.⁴ “Such a synthetic imperial authority, and its vicissitudes,” Wang observes, “made Qing politics very complicated.” Under such circumstances, even if local representatives of the Qing state managed to live up to the ideal of merging their efforts with those of powerful people in local society, blending their capacities as seamlessly as suggested in the ink metaphor, there would nevertheless have remained great diversity around the realm in the actual techniques of governance in play. Qing rulers were, per force then, well rehearsed in juggling a wide and varied repertoire of scripts, costumes, and leading roles.

If the languages, the guises, and the substantive techniques of imperial rule were, then, decidedly multiple, we must accept that *the experience of being ruled* by the Qing state was also by no means a uniform or even, perhaps, a very unifying one. The Qing principle of “adjusting measures to local customs and conditions” (*congsu congyi*) while also pursuing the ideal of blending the powers of the bureaucratic state with those of what were

vastly different local religious and cultural elites could only have produced an extraordinarily varied set of understandings and assessments, among its subjects, of the nature of the state itself, and of the qualities of its rule.

Even today, of course, the presence of the Chinese state and its authority are embodied and acted out in some remarkably varied forms and ways in different regions and localities across the land. The wholesome and efficacious alliances between society and state that may be found in some places and some circumstances are not yet, if they ever can be, spread evenly over the territory and into all four corners of the realm like butter on a slice of bread. This is not a dilemma of government unique to China, of course. Any modern state's authority is to some degree lumpy and as likely to be loathed by some of its citizens and subjects as it is to be loved by others. Still, the penchant in Chinese state practice for what Huang calls "centralized minimalism" and the old ideal of deliberately eliding state–society separations, so as to project state authority into communities through the auspices of persons already notable and strong in their local contexts—these habits make the problem of localized variation a more serious one for governance in China than it is in some other systems of rule. And this is one reason why those in China who stubbornly hope for social harmony and for a congruence of viewpoints and concerns to materialize that will bring China's leaders into closer alignment with their "public" are always subject to critique and derision by those who call instead for checks and balances.

Notes

1. Initial disclaimer: By invoking at the outset the notion that the state may be usefully compared in some respects to a repertoire theatre company, I do not wish to be misunderstood as suggesting that government is tantamount to theatre (though, of course, it sometimes is that), nor do I mean to imply that state actors are simply play actors (though, of course, they sometimes are that). The suggestion is simply that rulers in China, as in any complex polity, have at their disposal a range of historically well-rehearsed scripts and familiar techniques of rule from among which they may elect to perform as they confront the ever-shifting challenges of governance. New scripts may be added, and some of the more tired ones may be deleted from the available repertoire from time to time. And of course the subtleties of each state actor's performance of his or her role may greatly vary with the occasion. The idea of a rich and slowly evolving repertoire for rule that acquires specific characteristics in different societies in the course of historical development has been adapted from Charles Tilly's (1986) concept of "repertoires of protest."

2. Numerous other scholars have already noted this process at work in the Chinese context. For just two examples dealing with policy in different realms and different periods, see Kelliher (1992) and Tsai (2002). The use of this general political practice (or play) has not been confined only to "market reformers" or reformists in China. "Leftist radicals" and "rightist revisionists" both used it too when attempting to advance their policy agendas in the Mao era.

3. Among other scholars who have recently engaged in similarly motivated and boldly cross-temporal studies and analyses of Chinese state practices, we might note especially the fine work done by Thornton (2007) and Remick (2004).

4. The emperor's embodiment of a synthesis of roles, as expressed in a great variety of artistically, linguistically, and religiously intermixed aesthetics, has been most vividly illustrated in the catalogue for a 2005 Royal Academy of Arts exhibition in London. See Rawski and Rawson (2005).

References

- DUARA, PRASENJIT (1988) *Culture, Power, and the State*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press.
- KELLIHER, DANIEL (1992) *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979–1989*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press.
- RAWSKI, EVELYN S. and JESSICA RAWSON (2005) *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*. London: Royal Academy of Arts.
- REMICK, ELIZABETH R. (2004) *Building Local States: China during the Republican and Post-Mao Eras*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center.
- THORNTON, PATRICIA M. (2007) *Disciplining the State: Virtue, Violence and State-Making in Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center.
- TILLY, CHARLES (1986) *The Contentious French*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.
- TSAI, KELLE S. (2002) *Back-Alley Banking: Private Entrepreneurs in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press.

Vivienne Shue is the Leverhulme Professor and Director of the Contemporary China Studies Programme at Oxford University and a fellow of St. Antony's College. Her most recent publication, coedited with Christine Wong, is *Paying for Progress in China: Public Finance, Human Welfare and Changing Patterns of Inequality* (2007). In 2007, she marked her 30th year of service as a member of the editorial board of *Modern China*.