STRENGTHENING POLITICAL LEGITIMACY: 
POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION OF CHINESE YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

The story and presentation of a country’s political history is generally crafted with the intention of further reinforcing the political legitimacy of the current government in power, and although political legitimacy can be discussed from many different perspectives, political socialization is an important aspect of solidifying a government’s political legitimacy. This is particularly true with political socialization of a country’s youth, as this population segment is the next generation of participants in and leaders of the current government, making the process of political socialization that results in further solidifying political legitimacy all the more important. This paper focuses on the presentation of China’s political history to Chinese high school youth and makes use of Chinese high school history textbooks to show how the Chinese Communist Party’s rise to power, the relationship between democracy and Socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the political thought of previous Party leaders are all presented with the aim of further strengthening the political legitimacy of the Party’s dominant leadership position. Additionally, as the textbooks used for discussion in this paper are approved by the government through the Ministry of Education, they can be perceived as promoting Party view. Therefore, along with the idea of political socialization, Austin’s speech acts will also be utilized in the challenges section of the paper. By making use of the process of political socialization during high school history classes, the Party is able to make use of just one more component in the process of political socialization to further solidify the idea of a just and legitimate government under dominant Party rule.

Keyword: Political Socialization, Political Legitimacy, Chinese Politics

INTRODUCTION

Political socialization, “…the way in which a society transmits political orientations-knowledge, attitudes or norms, and values from generation to generation,” (Easton and Dennis 1965, p.41) is important for all governments in maintaining cohesiveness of society and further reinforcing political legitimacy of the current government. Political socialization was initially promoted by scholar Herbert Hyman in the 1950s, and since then the political socialization of youth has been documented by the following scholars. Meyer and Rubinson stated in their study on education and political development that the government has played an important role in the political socialization process of the
younger generation since World War II, “The consolidation of national political authority extends education throughout society as a means of incorporating its human material in its structure, and politically incorporated educational systems integrate and legitimate political action.” (Meyer, Rubinson 1975, p.134) Easton and Dennis found that, “The political socialization of new members is one of the most far-reaching and most consequential of these forces. The political system must somehow provide a flow of information about and continuously create deep feelings of loyalty and obedience for its basic forms.” (Easton, Dennis 1965,p.40) In another study it was found that school-level and classroom-level attributes are related to four political socialization outcomes: political knowledge, political attitudes and values toward society and politics, attitudes toward political participation, and participation in political or quasi-political affairs. (Ehman, 1980, p.99) It was also noted that “…Within Western societies at least, it is clear that all schools, with whatever degree of intensity, explicitness, and self-consciousness, engage a project that has three major elements: instruction, selection and socialization.” (Kapferer 1981, p.258).

Political legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party is strengthened through the political socialization of Chinese youth. Although there are many facets of education as well as societal and individual factors that also play a role in the political socialization process, the role high school history classes play is an important component as the texts present the history behind the legitimate rise to power of the government. In turn this provides a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding for each young citizen in the political socialization process. This is particularly true in the case of China where textbooks used in the classroom are published by the People’s Education Press, an organization under the Ministry of Education, and generally used nationwide. The textbook used for discussion in this paper, entitled “History,” is a series of three textbooks. (People’s Education Press, 2007) The first text focuses on the political aspects of history, the second on political economy aspects and the third on cultural aspects, with each text divided into units which are then sub-divided into classes. As this paper is a discussion on the political socialization of Chinese high school youth regarding the legitimate rise of power of the Party, democracy and its relationship with Socialism with Chinese characteristics and political thought of previous government and Party members, the focus will mainly center on the first and second texts in the series.

Additionally, as the textbooks are published by an entity under direct control of the Ministry of Education in China, the texts can be considered a written form of speech acts representing Party and government view, an idea that will be discussed in the challenges and implications section of this paper. Austin proposes there are three types of speech acts, locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary acts are statements and illocutionary acts statements that involve an action. For example, in the statement, “I will come tomorrow,” contains an action in promising to come. Perlocutionary acts are the making of a statement that includes an action, but take it a step further and elicit a result. For example, by saying “I will come tomorrow,” and thereby making a promise that I will come, the result is that the listener reacts with a feeling such as reassurance or relief that the speaker will in fact come. (Austin 2012, p.9-11). The focus of this paper in terms of the political socialization process is the third type of speech act, because by promoting the Chinese Communist Party's writing of history, the intended result is for high school students to view the Chinese government under Communist rule as legitimate and just, thereby further strengthening the political
legitimacy of the Party and its continued dominant rule while at the same time still able to continue emphasizing democratic ideals.

However, Austin does not distinguish between intended and actual results of perlocutionary speech acts or if the intended result has been actualized and to what degree, necessitating a short discussion in the challenges section on the impact of speech acts in the classroom and how they correlate with speech acts of a political nature students may encounter outside the classroom. And although Conway et al’s assessment that even though researchers may disagree about the importance of mass media in the political socialization process, a number of studies have found that the news media is an important information source for children (Conway, M.M., Wyckoff, M.L., et al 1981, p.165). Therefore, speech acts promoted in the media potentially play an important role in reaching the intended result of overall successful political socialization.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION THROUGH HISTORY CLASSES

The three textbooks in the series “History” published by the People’s Education Press (People’s Education Press, 2007) are generally divided into units, with each unit subdivided into classes. The first text in the series focusing on political aspects of the rise of the Party includes eight units, and within each unit there are a range of two to five classes. The second book focusing on political economy has a total of eight units, with each unit containing a range from two to four classes. The third book focusing on cultural aspects has a total of nineteen units, with each unit including a range of three to four classes. The presentation of history in all the textbooks generally starts from ancient times and then works forward to the present, with some units focusing on aspects of world history, including Greek, Roman, and other Western history. In this section, the texts will be used to show political legitimacy related to the rise of the Chinese Communist Party, the relationship between democracy and Socialism, and the continuity of political ideology from the establishment of New China to present day.

First, the establishment of the legitimate rise of the Chinese Communist Party to power is perhaps one of the most important aspects of political legitimacy through political socialization, and is an idea clearly shown in all three parts of the “History” textbook. The first in the series of three texts aims to do so politically, the second book in the series from a political economy perspective and the third culturally. As political ideology and political economy have been key to the establishment of a legitimate government under dominant Party leadership that has seen great emphasis placed on the idea of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, much of the discussion in this section will center on the first and second textbooks. In the first text of the series, discussion on the rise of the Chinese Communist Party follows after units discussing China’s humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialists and a weak Qing dynasty government defenseless to help its people. The discussion then moves to Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao’s involvement in establishing the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai in 1920, which is followed by a discussion on the cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party and Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese Nationalist Party, the fight against foreign imperialists and subsequent Nationalist Party orders to kill Chinese Communist Party members with the encouragement of foreign countries, and effectively ending the cooperation between the two parties. (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.68, 69) The formal establishment on October 1, 1949 of the People’s Republic of China was
described as a momentous event and “After the Chinese Communist Party took of power, they began to build a new social and political system according to their beginning a new era.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.94)

An international relations aspect was also highlighted and a detailed account given of the international community’s support for and establishment of diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Emphasis was placed on the establishment of diplomatic ties with the United States and Japan, as well as China regaining their seat in the United Nations. (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.112-115) The non-aligned movement was also highlighted, with China’s continued cooperation under the Party cited. (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.124). The disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was presented as, “Socialism once saw great achievements made in the USSR, and there were also many lessons learned. Even though the USSR has already disintegrated, people have never stopped exploring the path to Socialism.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 2, p.93)

The second text in the series is also important in showing the legitimate rise of the Party in terms of political economy policy, which has played a significant role in the continued modernization of China under dominant Party leadership. After units discussing the characteristics of ancient Chinese economy, the development of capitalism in the world, the economic structure of modern China and the development of a market economy in China, the fourth unit focuses on the path of Socialism with Chinese characteristics. Unit four presents the first steps on the path to building a Socialist country given the hardships involved, including the lack of an industrial base as an underdeveloped agricultural country. However, the Party is presented as the leadership that changed this, “After the founding of the People’s Republic of China and under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and government, after only three years in 1952, industry and agriculture were at historical record highs. The economic recovery was completed in this time and created the conditions necessary to build a planned economy.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 2 p.50)

This central leadership position of the Party and the modernization and economic rise of China was also shown with the abandoning of a struggle based on economic classes and instead, “the Chinese Communist Party and government’s focus turned to the strategy of modernizing Socialism, and the work of the Party and government focusing on economic development.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 2 p.54) This is considered the starting point for the reform and opening up and the path to Socialism with Chinese characteristics, and is followed by a discussion regarding the development of a “Socialist market economy,” where the Party and government continued to play a central role in setting economic policies conducive to the continued fast-paced economic development of the country. This is shown with the political and economic changes that took place, with China transformed from a mainly agricultural society to one which emphasized the development of the manufacturing sector. The fifth unit of the second text discusses the changes in modern lifestyles and focuses the student on the higher quality of living seen through the economic and political policies of the Party, creating the image of a just leader.

Second, political ideology related to both Socialism and democracy have continually played a key role in speech acts made by Chinese Communist Party members and
government officials, just like the role democratic political ideology plays in the United States. Units four and six of book one focus on political aspects and the first of two main discussions are on democracy, with unit four titled “Modern China Opposing Aggression in the Tide of Democracy” with this introduction to this unit stating, “...In the domestic and international struggle against reactionaries, new democratic success was achieved. In this way, modern China was able to resist aggression and oppression, pursue independence of the Chinese people, oppose feudal autocracy, and achieve the dream of democratic progress.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p. 50) The Chinese Communist Party is placed in a central position to achieving this newfound democratic success with, “In the last sixty years as the governing party, the Chinese Communist Party has led the people in unremitting efforts to build and perfect the system of the People’s Congress, and the Chinese Communist Party has led the multi-party cooperation, system of political consultation, and the system of regional ethnic autonomy to build a democratic system with Chinese characteristics.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1 p.93)

Language such as ethnic equality, democratic principles, and local democratic elections was also used. (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1 p.96, 97, 100) The idea of elections, central to democracy in the West, is presented in the text as having been important to the Chinese Socialist system of government, with local elections held in 1953 covering a population of 5.7 trillion people and electing more than five million local People’s Congress representatives. The Election Day of 1953 was described in this way, “The people saw Election Day like a festive holiday, hanging up lanterns and festive decorations, and solemnly exercising their right to vote.” A Guangdong overseas Chinese was quoted as he described exercising his right to vote in this way, “I have lived for over 90 years and been to many countries, and have yet to see an election this democratic.” The election was also described as unprecedented in size for New China. (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1 p.95) Elections for the Central People’s Government Committee were also highlighted, with Mao Zedong and other top leaders elected. (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.95)

Third, the presentation of past leaders and how their ideas are presented is also important to continued dominant Party rule. Policies or political ideology deemed as mistakes were clearly stated in the texts, particularly relating to Great Leap Forward economic policies, the Cultural Revolution and Gang of Four, as well as Chen Duxiu’s continuation of leftist policies. As for the failed Great Leap Forward economic policy, it was presented in this way, “This meeting [the Eighth Congressional Congress] had the right analysis regarding Chinese societal issues and main tasks at hand, and it was a great contribution to the development of Socialism in China. However, the path of the eighth Congressional Congress was not completed.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 2 p.51) As a result, “1959 to 1961 saw the worst economic situation since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, and facing these economic difficulties, the Central government started to correct the “leftness” in the agricultural sector.” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 2 p.52) However, despite these mistakes the Party and government are still presented as realizing and correcting them, further moving forward in the right direction in creating a better life for Chinese citizens. Unit four of book one’s introduction with a focus on Socialism with Chinese characteristics was described in this way, “During the Eighth National Congress, the Chinese Communist Party had the correct interpretation of domestic issues, but as a result of being too anxious in seeking
success building the path to Socialism, the Great Leap Forward, the People’s Commune and the Cultural Revolution happened. Despite this, 30 years after having established New China and through the Party and people’s perseverance, great success was achieved in building Socialism in China.”(People’s Education Press 2007, Book 2, p.49)

CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION RESULTS

This section will discuss the impact of political speech acts written in the history textbooks used in high school classrooms and how they correlate with political speech acts encountered outside the classroom. As the textbooks are published by a government entity under the Ministry of Education, it can be inferred that the intended result of the textbooks is to act as one component in the successful political socialization of Chinese high school youth, but the intended result of the impact of this one particular history class is actually realized and to what extent is almost immeasurable. Challenges for successful political socialization for this specific class include differences in class instruction and actual emphasis placed and interpretation of the written text throughout the various provinces and regions of China. It is possible that not all the material is discussed in class and that some key points might be glossed over. Additionally, although this class is mandatory for all high school students, it might not receive as much attention as other core classes such as English, math or the natural sciences. Chinese students might also use the class time for assignments of other classes while the teacher is lecturing, making the impact of the class all the more difficult to assess. Aside from these factors, other potential challenges exist in terms of successful political socialization of Chinese youth and attaining the result of strengthening the political legitimacy of the government under dominant Party leadership.

Although the success or failure of the political socialization process as a whole cannot be based on one high school history class textbook alone, one potential challenge in regards to this particular set of history class textbooks is the possibility that it does not match how the media presents political legitimacy of the Party and government through speech acts made by government officials promoted by the media. However, as this text is published by an organization directly under control of the Ministry of Education, the facts presented can generally be regarded as Party and government approved. So when taking another look at the political rhetoric presented in the media, one does find that the ideas presented in the media are supportive of the rhetoric found in the textbooks, potentially increasing the success of political socialization. An example can be the Eighteenth National Congress, which continued to legitimate past political thought and policy. During a speech at the Eighteenth National Congress, Hu Jintao stated, “The Eighteenth National Congress is one of great importance, being held when China has entered the decisive stage of completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects. The underlying theme of the Congress is to hold high the great banner of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, follow the guidance of Deng Xiaoping theory, the important thought of Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development, free up the mind, implement the policy of reform and opening up, pool our strength, overcome all difficulties, firmly march on the path of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects.”(Xinhua, 2012) Although the textbooks did not specifically cite the Three Represents or the Scientific Outlook on
Development (which are likely left in the textbook dealing directly with politics), the same continuity of legitimating past policies and political thought is evident.

Second, discussions regarding democracy are not new in China and have been occurring since the Qing dynasty. However, as a Communist Party that claims the right to what amounts to legitimate single-party rule (with some cooperation on the part of other parties), the promotion of democracy has been done in such a way as to solidify the continued leadership of the Party. This has generally been done by presenting the idea of democracy within the Party, with emphasis further placed on the Party’s cooperation with other parties in the Political Consultative Congress. It was also promoted during the Eighteenth National Congress. “The great contributions of the Eighteenth National Congress are the promotion of the cohesiveness of the Party, a program of action on public opinion, and leading the people of all ethnic groups to continued progress with the new collective leadership. This will be done through Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, Three Represents, Scientific Outlook on Development, unwaveringly following a path of development with Chinese characteristics, theory, and system in an effort to reach a moderately prosperous society. In order to do this, the eight basic requirements must be realized.” (Renmin Wang, 2013) The eight basic requirements include maintaining the people's principal position in the country, continuing to release and develop the productive forces, persevering in reform and opening up, safeguarding social fairness and justice, striving for common prosperity, promoting social harmony, pursuing peaceful development, and upholding the leadership of the Party. (CRI English, 2012)

More importantly, the rise of the Party was also presented in what amounts to the Western ideal of democracy, most notably with elections and public participation. Democratic ideals even appear more emphasized in the first text than those of Socialism, with a good example being that when first describing the rise of the Communist Party to power in 1949, the heading of the text is “New China Builds Democracy,” and then a discussion on the cooperation of the different parties under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party follows (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.94) Yet the texts provide no clear definition to the word democracy, leaving the student to envision their own ideal of democracy. As democracy in the West is characterized first and foremost with elections, that China under the Chinese Communist Party emphasizes democracy, particularly the elections aspect of democracy, in its earliest years is significant, particularly since Deng Xiaoping stated in the 1970s that democratic values should be strengthened. Another related challenge is how to present the issue of Taiwan, which has democratized with multi-party elections.

Third, wording of political speech acts is also important. In terms of word choice presented in the texts, the first to be discussed is the idea of revolution, a phrase still being used today by government officials. However, the continued usage of this words presents a challenge simply because the Party is no longer one of revolution as seen decades prior, but one of a government in full leadership position which had decades prior already called off class revolution. Revolution, although deemed as necessary every once in a while by Thomas Jefferson, is still not seen as a settling issue for those in favor of a market economy. Second, the wording in terms of Taiwan leadership is also important. It should be noted that the wording of “the meeting of Communist and Nationalist party leadership” (People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1,
p.104) has emphasis of party leadership and not of government leadership. However, as the word leadership is involved, there is some credibility given to the leadership of the Nationalist Party in Taiwan as legitimate. The third language terminology to receive closer examination is that of “one country, two systems,” which was defined in the text as, “specifically speaking, Mainland China, with a population of one billion people, implement Socialism, while Hong Kong and Taiwan implement capitalism.(People’s Education Press 2007, Book 1, p.102) However, China is sometimes accused by Western countries or businesses of not operating on the basis of a market economy, with the government intervening in many areas of business.

Fourth, the idea that “people have never stopped exploring the path to Socialism” in regards to the disintegration of the USSR, continues to support the Chinese Communist Party’s modifications and continued tinkering with finding the correct path to developing Socialism. In the case of the USSR, the correct path was not found and by no means suggests that Socialism itself is wrong.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented one aspect leading to the strengthening of political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party through the political socialization of youth and compulsory high school history classes. As there are many facets to the political socialization process, including the entire curriculum of compulsory education as well as other family and societal factors that influence the success or failure of the political socialization process, this paper discussed just one component of this process. The discussion centered on government approved high school history textbooks and how they present the rise of the Chinese Communist Party to power, the relationship between democracy and Socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the continuity in the presentation of post-1949 political ideology. It was noted that the presentation of history does generally support the continued political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party’s dominant leadership position and that the school plays a role in the transmission of political knowledge in the political socialization process, but there are challenges to this which were discussed from the perspective of Austin’s perlocutionary speech acts.

The challenges include those involved in the actual transmission of political knowledge itself, ensuring students grasp and interpret all that is taught in the intended way. Other outside factors also pose challenges, such as the media and society. In terms of the media, political speech acts made by government officials may potentially be inconsistent with the history that is presented in the textbooks. However, generally speaking it was found that the speech acts made by political officials today do in fact support the ideas presented in the texts, including the Party’s rise to power, the relationship between Socialism and democracy and the continuity of Party political thought and policies. However, other challenges do exist that potentially raise challenges for the successful political socialization of Chinese youth, including specific word choice in political speech acts, such as revolution, leadership issues related to Taiwan, capitalism and the “one country, two systems policy,” and the disintegration of the United Soviet Socialist Republic and what this has meant for the path of Socialism in other countries.

By no means is this paper a comprehensive study of the political socialization of Chinese youth, but it does offer a glimpse of one component of the political
socialization process. Lasting effects of the political socialization of high school students is difficult to measure and is an aspect not thoroughly discussed in this paper. Further work will relate to understanding more completely the impact that political speech acts and political socialization have on political legitimacy, particularly in regards to the Chinese Communist Party.

REFERENCES


