

**Neo-Socialist Governmentality:  
Managing Freedom in the Peoples' Republic of China.**

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**Abstract**

This article conceptualizes ‘neo-socialist governmentality’ as a set of rationalities of governance that aim to shape, nurture, constrain and guide the autonomy of Chinese subjects in the post-revolutionary era. Contrasting neo-liberal and neo-socialist governmentalities, we outline the mechanisms of translation and coordination that open, appropriate and restrain spaces for the pluralistic problematization of concerns for the self, culture, and society. Focusing on the discourses and institutions of ‘constructing spiritual civilization’ and drawing on research conducted among a range of voluntary groups, we highlight the productive tensions inherent to the neo-socialist aim of fusing the centrifugal forces of socialist, market and Chinese civilizational subjectivities and authorities. Our case points to the value of theorizing distinct forms of governmentality associated with different historical trajectories and socio-political systems.

**Keywords:** China, post-socialism, neo-socialism, neo-liberalism, governmentality, spiritual civilization, ideology

## Introduction

Following Deng Xiaoping's launch of the "Opening and Reform-Policy" in 1978, which book-ended a command economy and thirty years of revolutionary struggles, it seemed as if the People's Republic of China (PRC) had confirmed the "end of history": the communist regime seemed to admit the primacy of the market, cloaking the ideological defeat of Marxism under the labels of "market socialism" and "socialism with Chinese characteristics". As market reforms deepened, it seemed to many, both inside and outside the PRC, that it was only a matter of time before political reforms would follow. The burgeoning capitalist reforms of the 1980s surely would lead to some form of political liberalism. Signs of this transition seemed to be the growing spaces of freedom enjoyed by Chinese people in the realms of consumption, lifestyle, beliefs and values.

Forty years later, however, under the reign of Xi Jinping, this historical teleology has been challenged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s renewed claim of absolute supremacy, the ramping up of ideological orthodoxy, the strengthening of the state in economic ownership and management, the deepening surveillance and monitoring of public discourse, the expansion of technologies of social control, the tightening restrictions on social groups and cultural movements, and so on. The fortieth anniversary of the reforms in 2018 has been described by many as marking the end of an era, even as the post-Cold War "liberal international order" is challenged by populism, nationalism and authoritarianism in many parts of the world.

The new configuration raises several questions. Has the PRC suddenly changed course, or were experts and scholars previously mistaken in their assumptions about the direction of change during the reform era? In sociology and anthropology, terms such as "post-socialist" and "late socialist" have enjoyed wide currency when describing the socio-political structures and dynamics of the PRC during the reform period (Hoffman 2006, Ho 2010). Implicit in these terms was the assumption of a transition away from socialism. However, even as the domains of freedom of expanded, so did the reach and sophistication of methods and techniques of social management

and control, progressively blurring the distinctions between society and the state.

In this article, we draw on governmentality theory to propose an alternative perspective on the transformations of socialism since the Mao era which should not be seen in terms of a zero-sum game between authoritarianism and freedom, but rather in terms of the production and management of freedom – what we call “neo-socialist governmentality.” This perspective points to the elaboration and deployment of a form of governance which aims to enhance both the space of freedom and of its guidance and control. We argue that the past four decades were not characterized by the decline of socialism but rather by the gradual rise of “neo-socialism.” Political philosophers have long grappled with the normative tensions between socialist China’s revolutionary ideals and its market reforms (Ci, 1994; Lin, 2006). Here, however, we propose to outline the genealogy of the methods of government that have been deployed to manage these tensions within society. The ideological and institutional changes under Xi, we suggest, are but the visible expressions of a decades-long reconfiguration of Mao-era socialist governance. The foundation of this reconfiguration was laid within the framework of “constructing socialist spiritual civilization” as soon as the market reforms were launched in the late 1970s.

While a governmentality perspective is fruitful for understanding the transformation of Chinese socialism, we also use the Chinese case to question and enrich discussions of governmentality in sociological theory. Notably, it forces us to decouple the conflation between governmentality and neo-liberalism that is widespread in the literature. Instead, we argue that if governmentality is understood as the non-coercive production and management of freedom, then different forms of governmentality can exist and evolve in different historical, geographic and ideological contexts, with their own genealogies and trajectories. This leads us to outline a contrasting model of neo-liberal and neo-socialist governmentalities, showing how the latter appropriates but diverges from the former. Through this approach, we hope to open the possibility

for a comparative and historical sociology of governmentalities which extends to non-liberal polities.

We begin with a discussion of the concept of neo-socialist governmentality and compare its features with the neo-liberal variety. We then discuss the mechanisms of *coordination* and *translation* that are central to the integration of centrifugal discourses and rationalities around the transcendental authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). We outline the discourse of “socialist spiritual civilization” that has provided the ideological framework for this work of integration, while opening spaces for the pluralistic problematization of moral and social issues, notably around concerns for the self, for culture, and for society. We conclude by discussing the structural relationship between non-coercive and coercive forms of government in Chinese neo-socialism. We illustrate our argument with examples drawn from our ethnographic research conducted between 2008 and 2018 among a range of cultural, religious and volunteer groups.

### **Governmentality in China**

Foucault defined governmentality as the ‘the conduct of conduct’ (*conduire des conduites*, Foucault 1994: 237), consisting of both ‘rationalities’ and ‘technologies’ of government, which aim to guide and influence peoples’ behavior without coercion. A rationality, in this context, refers to “a specific form of reasoning, which defines the telos of action and the adequate means to achieve it” (Pyykkönen 2015: 9); this includes ways of knowing, representing, problematizing and evaluating. Technologies refer to ‘assemblages of persons, techniques, institutions, instruments for the conducting of conduct,’ for creating the conditions within which people will exercise free will in conducting themselves in the direction desired by authorities (Miller and Rose 2008: 16).

These ‘authorities’ are not synonymous with the state but are assemblages of authoritative discourses and institutions that build and apply expert knowledge around specific problematized domains, becoming the medium through which people are assessed and assess themselves, and

through which programs for individual and collective improvement are devised. The rationalities and technologies are found in healthcare, corporate management and entrepreneurialism, consumerism, education, psychology, social work, criminology, spirituality and so on. These mutually reinforce each other to produce individuals who through their reflexivity and self-government contribute to the maintenance of social order and reduce the state's need to resort to disciplinary or coercive power. In this way, governmentality operates both through and outside of the state, and often independently of it, such that peoples' lives and subjectivities are shaped in non-coercive ways. Thus, governmentality shifts the focus away from a dichotomy between state power and free individuals, towards the ways in which people are governed and govern themselves by nurturing, structuring and orienting their freedom (Rose 1999).

These conceptualizations are derived from the analysis of the history of governance in Western liberal societies. Any meaningful consideration of governmentality in the PRC, a society that is neither Western nor liberal, needs to attend to the parallel historical trajectories of governance in both regions, and to the circulations of rationalities and technologies of government between the two. The Euro-American genealogy of governmentality begins with the classical liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which the domain of the state is limited and 'civil society' actors including businesses, churches, unions and philanthropies contribute to the governance of society. New forms of expertise and institutions in town planning, health, sanitation and education were gradually coordinated and integrated by the state under welfare liberalism. In "advanced liberalism" or "neo-liberalism," the shrinking of the welfare state is associated with the application of market rationalities to the management of domains previously deemed outside the purview of market logic, and with the "birth of a new ethic of the active, choosing, responsible, autonomous individual obliged to be free, and to live life as if it were an outcome of choice" (Miller and Rose, 2008: 18).

Throughout these transformations, a constant has been the belief that individuals have intrinsic rights and freedoms, limiting the scope of legitimate political and legal regulation, and

leading to the proliferation of methods and strategies to help people to care for themselves without being governed by others (Miller and Rose 2008: 204). What of governmentality in the PRC, then, where such liberal beliefs have never been fully enshrined in the political and legal system? The history of modern China is characterized by the formation and transformations of hybrid governmentalities, combining rationalities and technologies of government derived from multiple sources in China, the West and the Soviet Union.

The establishment of the Republic of China in 1911 ushered in a frantic attempt to create a modern nation-state on-par with that of the imperial powers. In the midst of civil strife, warlordism and the Japanese invasion, the construction of the new republic occurred in fits and starts. In this process, many rationalities and technologies of governance were imported from the West, taken up enthusiastically by fledgling bureaucracies, philanthropies, missionary and religious societies, universities, academic societies and organizations such as the YMCA, which set out to deploy social surveys, educational programmes, urban plans, hygiene campaigns and so on, to reform the customs of the people and promote the creation of a civilized citizenship. During the 1930s, this culminated in the “New Life” movement (Dirlik, 1975), launched by the Kuomintang military regime, which combined inspirations and techniques from fascism, the Christian social gospel and Confucian self-cultivation.

After the establishment of the Peoples’ Republic in 1949, the communist revolutionaries instated a Leninist system of control imported from the Soviet Union which aimed to put all aspects of life under the direction of centralized bureaucracies. At the same time, the revolutionary ethos was strongly voluntaristic. From the moment of its birth, the new “democratic dictatorship”, as it was described in the constitution of the PRC, thus engendered a fundamental challenge: it required that the regime be built, maintained and expressed through voluntary action. The Party needed to mould ignorant, superstitious and oppressed masses into free subjects; its ideal was not

suppression but liberated political subjects who would freely carry out the project of national liberation and collective rejuvenation under the guidance of the Party.

With the end of Cultural Revolution in 1978 and the launch of market reforms, neo-liberal discourses and practices were introduced as the PRC began to engage with the World Bank and other international institutions and multinational corporations that required the adoption of neo-liberal strategies of governance as part of their financing, cooperation and investment programmes (Joseph, 2012). This occurred at precisely the time in which neoliberalism became a dominant mode of governmentality in the English-speaking West. The combined liberalization and authoritarian disciplining of the labour market – the PRC’s transformation into the ‘world’s factory’ – was an essential component of the global neoliberal order (H. Wang & Karl, 2004).

The CCP’s combination of technocratic Leninism and revolutionary voluntarism would, in the context of economic reforms, enhance its affinities with methods of governance that enhance the autonomy of subjects while guiding them toward the realization of the collective goals it set for the population. The absence of political liberalism and the notion of the inviolable right of individuals to privacy and to resist the state mean that the possibilities of social engineering and strategic interventions to shape subjectivities and nurture compliant individual autonomy are far greater in the PRC than in liberal contexts (Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009: 7).

### **Neo-socialist governmentality**

The transformation of political ideology in the post-Mao period brought with it a fundamental change in the methods through which the population was governed. A number of studies have applied the notion of neoliberal governmentality to theorize this transformation in several domains, ranging from the PRC’s policies on eugenics and population control (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Sigley, 1996) to migrant workers (H. Yan, 2003), education (Woronov, 2009),

professionalism (Hoffman, 2006), community building (Bray, 2006) and record keeping (Yang, 2011).

While the governmentality approach has been critiqued for its Euro-American orientation, these and other studies on China have demonstrated its cross-cultural relevance (Bray & Jeffreys, 2016; Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009; Sigley, 1996; Dutton & Hindess, 2016). However, scholars have struggled to describe how this ‘neoliberal’ governmentality can fit within a decidedly ‘illiberal’ socialist regime. Harvey (2005) describes China’s reform process as ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’, while Sigley speaks of ‘the emergence of a hybrid socialist-neoliberal (or perhaps “neoleninist”) form of political rationality, one that is both authoritarian in a familiar political and technocratic sense and yet also seeks to govern certain subjects through their own autonomy’ (Sigley, 2006: 489). But doubts remain over the question of whether the strategies of governance described in these studies can accurately be described as ‘neo-liberal’ (Nonini, 2008; Y. Yan, 2010: 208). In the words of Kipnis, the concept risks becoming an ‘an overarching trope’ that ‘occludes more than it reveals’ (Kipnis, 2007: 384).

Some authors have used the notion of ‘neo-socialism’ to emphasize both continuities with the Mao-era revolutionary heritage and the reinvention of socialism through discourses and practices derived from global free-market capitalism. Pieke introduced the term to describe the hybridization of ‘indigenous socialist ideas and practices’ and ‘ideas and techniques of government from neoliberal thought and practice in the West’ – governmental technologies which support, modernize and strengthen the Party’s Leninist leading role in Chinese society (Pieke, 2009: 9–10). Ho has, similarly, characterized neo-socialism as an ‘unconventional agglomeration between a market and property rights logic and the Leninist party-state power structure, combined and completed with an untarnished goal of socialism,’ under which ‘people are asked to exercise “choice” in everyday life and adopt individual responsibility as their dominant economic ethos’ (2015: 10-11).



Drawing on these authors' definitions of neo-socialism, we propose to conceptualize as *neo-socialist governmentality* the mode of governance and subject formation that emerged from the 1980s onwards through such hybridizations. This form of governmentality, like its counterparts in Western liberal regimes, cannot be equated with simple conceptions of state control. However, neo-socialist governmentality, though often *ad hoc* and unstable in its localized practice (Sigley, 2006: 489; Ho, 2017: 12-14), is not a purely contingent assemblage: it is shaped by the strategies of a political regime that visibly and invisibly projects its will onto the population and has, over the past decades, developed an enormous, vertically organized apparatus equipped with increasingly sophisticated instruments of social engineering and for shaping peoples' subjectivities and guiding their conduct from a distance. In this sense, neo-socialist governmentality continues the distinctive Maoist approach to total social transformation by means of top-down propaganda, social reorganization, art and education (Dutton & Hindess, 2016: 22, 23). Indeed, this governmentality is *neo-socialist* in that its explicit aim is to revive socialism, to open a new phase in socialist construction after the exhaustion of both the classical socialist command economy and of the Maoist revolutionary mobilization.

### **Comparing neo-liberal and neo-socialist governmentalities**

In addition to the absence of liberal legal rights and freedoms, there is a fundamental structural difference between neo-liberal and neo-socialist governmentalities: in the neo-liberal context, expert authorities are distributed in a decentralized network of institutions, organizations, professional societies and state agencies, which are often relatively independent of each other. In neo-socialist governmentality, many of the expert authorities, discourses and technologies resemble those of the West and partake in the same global circulation of scientific knowledge production and international technical norms. But, at the same time, they are never fully independent, and are institutionally anchored to centralized state and Party organs that deploy their own techniques to ensure compliance to the Party's goals – through methods that aim for such

compliance to be voluntary and self-directed. Neo-liberal governmentality disguises itself behind a naturalized ideology of economic freedom, individual agency and common sense, while the financial and corporate elites whose diffused interests it serves conceal themselves behind the partisan spectacle of electoral politics and culture wars. Neo-socialist governmentality, on the other hand, is absolutely transparent in its goals, its methods, and the centralized political party it serves – a transparency that, ironically, is its main veil, as the subjects of its power shrug off or ignore the propaganda it encodes while it increasingly saturates public and private spaces.

Neo-liberal governmentality aims for “the strategic creation of social conditions that encourage and necessitate the production of *homo economicus*: an individual who is morally responsible for navigating the social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculations grounded in market-based principles to the exclusion of all other ethical values and social interests” (Hamann 2009: 37). Neo-socialist governmentality, on the other hand, aims to fuse into a single, internally coherent political subject three modes of subjectivity, each of which is associated with a distinctive political rationality: a *socialist subjectivity*, loyal to the transcendent authority of the Party and trusting its stewardship of the market and of the nation; a *market subjectivity*, capable of operating autonomously and effectively as producer and consumer in the market economy, and a *civilized Chinese subjectivity* embodying the excellent virtues and traditions of Chinese civilization and on-par with, if not superior to, liberal Western society (Palmer 2019). The synthesis of the three is inherently unstable, given that it involves often incommensurable sets of authorities: socialist ideology and Party organs for the first; ‘international’ (i.e. Euro-American) academic discourses, institutions, forms of expertise and normative standards for the second; and popular cultural movements and networks for the third. ‘Neo-liberal’ rationalities and technologies are appropriated to serve the formation of the market subjectivity – but, ultimately, neo-socialist governmentality aims to produce subjects who are willing participants in the Party’s resurrection

of China's ancient, glorious civilization and its return to the centre of the global pantheon of nations – even if they may feel indifferent towards politics and ideology.

The authorities of neo-liberal governmentality are decentralized and distributed, and form a global network that is not co-extensive with a single nation-state – although the sites of the production of authoritative knowledge and standards are heavily concentrated in the United States and Britain and implemented globally through international institutions such as the EU, the World Bank, multinational corporations, international NGOs, and consulting firms, with former British colonies (Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia) serving as important nodes in the Asia-Pacific region. Neo-socialist governmentality, on the other hand, has until recently been territorially bounded within the mainland PRC. But the technologies of influence associated with the projection of Chinese 'soft power' and with the management of Chinese corporations overseas and special economic zones in the Belt and Road nations, are signs of its potential extension beyond the PRC.

Furthermore, while China is the birthplace of neo-socialist governmentality, the transformations in the mode of governance in other socialist regimes after the introduction of market reforms – Vietnam and Cuba since the 1990s, North Korea beginning in the past few years – can also be termed 'neo-socialist' since they also involve attempts to give a new life to socialism through comparable hybrids of Leninist organization and ideology, market rationalities, and national identity construction. In some instances, they explicitly take Chinese neo-socialism as a model for their own reforms. Thus, while neo-socialist governmentality has the PRC as its epicentre, it cannot be simply called a "Chinese governmentality." The transnational circulation of technologies of government reminds us that the distinction between neo-liberalism and neo-socialism is an analytical device that serves to draw out the specificities of each, and we should not forget the absence of clear boundaries, and the ongoing process of borrowings and hybridization between the two.

## Coordination and translation

A key problem of neo-socialist governmentality is the centrifugal tendencies of the three different rationalities of government and their associated authorities. Each of them, taken in isolation, engenders a dynamic that could lead in opposing directions: the ideology and practices of Chinese socialism always risk tending towards a conservatism or a “leftism” that resists the course of reforms and would turn the clock back to the Mao era; the discourses, standards and authorities associated with the market tend toward alignment with Western neo-liberalism, and the values associated with Chinese civilization may lead to non-socialist expressions of Chineseness, and to popular groups and movements that claim authority based on Confucianism or Chinese religion. Thus, mechanisms of translation and coordination are indispensable in regimes characterized by neo-socialist governmentality.

The types of conduct engendered through these different modes of governance need to be re-oriented toward the goals defined by the Party. The Party’s institutions of propaganda are the main instrument for this coordinating work. Some observers characterize this system as a vast, top-down apparatus for “marketing dictatorship”, of technologies of persuasion and social control through the mass dissemination of the Party line (Brady, 2008, 2012; Shambaugh, 2007). But here, we would like to examine how propaganda as “thought management” (Brady, 2012) can be seen as a set of institutions, channels and feedback loops through which a plurality of discourses is translated, coordinated and propagated.

In the PRC, all institutions for the production of knowledge and discourse, including universities, corporations, research institutes, professional associations, media, art and culture associations and civil society groups, are under the direct or indirect control or “guidance” of the Central Propaganda Bureau, which in turn takes orders from the CCP Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Group under the direction of a senior member of the Politburo (Brady, 2008: 9-10). To see this system as simply involving the restriction of freedom through the top-down

imposition of Party ideology, however, is to misunderstand the mechanisms of coordination within its framework. The propaganda system may rather be understood as a network of sites of production and dissemination of authoritative knowledge and discourse. Some sites, such as the Propaganda Bureau itself, are core nodes of production of ideological orthodoxy. Central media outlets such as the Peoples' Daily and China Central Television, are at only a slight remove from this core. But other entities are situated at ever greater distances from this centre. Different academic disciplines and institutions, media outlets, cultural associations and community groups, may be located at different points on this spectrum. While all are nominally under the authority of the propaganda system and subject to its guidelines and censorship, within them a plurality of different discourses prevails, subject to rationalities specific to their fields and at once distinct from and expressive of the "Party-speak" produced at the centre.

Mechanisms of *translation* are essential to forming this assemblage into a stable and yet dynamic coordinated system within the framework of ideological orthodoxy. As defined by Rose, 'In the dynamics of translation, alignments are forged between the objectives of authorities wishing to govern and the personal projects of those organizations, groups and individuals who are the subjects of government. It is through translation processes of various sorts that linkages are assembled between political agencies, public bodies, economic, legal, medical, social and technical authorities, and the aspirations, judgements and ambitions of formally autonomous entities, be these firms, factories, pressure groups, families or individuals.' (Rose 1999: 48).

The dynamics of translation are illustrated by the following examples taken from our research on the management of religion. One case are meetings and conferences that bring together representatives of the "religious sector," (*zongjiaojie*) – leaders of officially registered religious associations; the "academic sector" (*xueshujie*) – professors and researchers in academic institutions, and the "government sector" (*zhengjie*) – cadres whose work touches on religious affairs (Palmer, 2009). In the PRC, "sectors" refer to the totality of officially recognized authorities

within specialized social domains (Chau, 2018). Members of these three sectors, within their own networks, use discourses that may well be incommensurable: religious leaders use theology or cosmology; academics draw on Western social scientific theories and epistemologies, and officials are driven by instrumental political considerations. In meetings bringing the different sectors together to discuss, say, “Traditional Culture and Ecological Civilization”,<sup>1</sup> framed through invitation documents and opening speeches in the language of official propaganda, the actors from the different sectors learn how to translate their sectoral discourse into Party discourse, converting their interests, their claims, their suggestions, their analyses and their expressions of loyalty into a common language. Academic scholars play an important role in translating religious languages into secular, social scientific ones. These, however, are still incongruent with Sino-Marxist orthodoxy, and thus need to be translated once again into Party discourse.

While academics do not usually engage in Party-speak, programmes have been put into place to enhance their capacity of translation. In one case, a group of scholars of religion at a regional-level academy of social sciences were assigned on secondment to different government departments for a year. One of them was assigned to a Propaganda bureau and tasked to write political speeches for the mayor, together with other career propagandists. This scholar admitted the vast differences between her academic language and that of her colleagues and described how, through circulating drafts of speeches, she injected her perspectives derived from her academic training while learning the language of political speech. In another case, a scholar working on issues of religion and human rights, who was already fluent in Party discourse and adept at translating “liberal” positions into the official jargon, was co-opted into a meeting for drafting an official policy consultation document in which all participants were confined in an enclosed venue for two weeks, during which he and other participants negotiated their different positions and opinions into the wording of the document. Some scholars have two tracks of publishing – their public

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<sup>1</sup> A symposium co-organized by organizations representing the academic and religious communities of Environmental Science, Philosophy and Daoism in Nov. 2018.

academic publications, which follow the epistemologies prevalent in international academic journals, and internal reports, which may cover the same subject matter, but couched in political language and orientations.

These examples do not aim to show that religious leaders and scholars are able to maintain some independence in the face of the state, but rather to demonstrate that, through processes of translation both in public and outside of public view, they acquire the ability to speak the Party's language and to communicate their views and concerns in that language. At the same time a diversity of opinions and information percolates upward in the system, even as it is polished and "harmonized" with the official framework, becoming part of the flow of documents and drafts in circulation that are eventually translated into the form of official speeches, statements and policies that are then the subject of outward propaganda dissemination. These techniques, arrangements and procedures of translation contribute to the coordinating role of the Party, to the currency of its discourses as well as to their synthetic reach and sophistication, placing Party organs at the centre of a system of potentially centrifugal sectoral authorities, discourses and technologies.

### **Spiritual civilization: a framework for coordination and translation**

For coordination to be possible, a unifying ideological framework is required within which a plurality of views and languages can be translated and harmonized. We argue that this framework was laid just as the market reforms were launched and built up over the following decades through the campaign for "constructing socialist spiritual civilization".

The discourse of "socialist spiritual civilization" first emerged in 1979, when paramount leader Deng Xiaoping announced at the Fourth Chinese Literature and Arts Workers Representative Conference that, in addition to 'build[ing] a high level of material civilization', China must 'raise the scientific cultural level of all ethnic groups, develop a superior, rich and

multi-faceted cultural life, and build a high level of socialist spiritual civilization' (Deng, 1983: 208) Throughout the early 1980s, Spiritual civilization came to circumscribe an effort to counter the decline of collective values and morality, as instrumental and individualist values became more prevalent under the market economy, and to re-affirm the role of ideology in guiding the construction of culture. Even as the Party, through introducing the market reforms, allowed for the spread of a market-oriented subjectivity and instrumental rationality that could lead to the construction of material civilization, it sought to restrain its excesses through the complementary spiritual civilization based on culture, morality and ideology (Central Committee of the CCP, 1986).

In the early and mid-1980s, spiritual civilization was little more than an ideological formulation, with few institutional means of implementation other than sporadic mobilizations to foster 'socialist manners' (Dirlik, 1982). In the years following the Tiananmen student movement of 1989, however, when the regime feared the possibility of following the fate of former Soviet bloc and abandoning communism, the Party resolved to strengthen its authority – and spiritual civilization became the main framework for the non-coercive approach to accomplishing this task. From the mid-1990s until the present, the regime deployed increasingly sophisticated strategies and techniques for constructing spiritual civilization. A nation-wide structure of provincial and local 'civilization offices' was established, overseen by the Central Spiritual Civilization Office under the Propaganda Bureau, to assess, designate and reward exemplary 'civilized' households, businesses, neighbourhoods, villages and cities based on meeting criteria of good morals, hygiene, management, culture, "political atmosphere" and so on. Spiritual Civilization offices were also charged with promoting volunteering, civilized public behaviour, and both revolutionary and classical cultural traditions (Erbaugh, 2008).

The campaign for the construction of socialist spiritual civilization introduced a form of controlled political mobilization: it aimed to channel the new liberties opened up by the reforms into a productive relationship with the Party-state by shifting the public and coercive politics of



class struggle to a private and voluntary form of participative power within the boundaries laid out by the regime. The spiritual civilization framework turned the “negative” approach of the Maoist era into a “positive” one (Dynon, 2008: 90, 92). An ethos of “struggle” was to be replaced by one of “development”. Just as material civilization could be measured through indicators of a potentially infinite economic growth, spiritual civilization could be manifested through the continuous qualitative “improvement” of the population and the quantitative increase in indicators of education, culture, health and behaviour. The framework sought to re-appropriate the fallow emancipatory potential of post-Maoist political subjectivity by actively enlisting ordinary people, intellectuals and cadres in a creative effort for the construction of Chinese “civility”, providing a ‘new ethos, and channeling national energy into a new, constructive direction’ (Chen & Jin, 1997: 64).

In official discourse, “socialist spiritual civilization” became a term that covered everything from the revitalized deployment of Marxist ideology and symbolism to volunteer service, the nurturing of civil qualities (*suzhi*), becoming an informed consumer, embodying traditional Chinese values, as well as sports, the arts and intellectual pursuits. This discourse appears to onlookers as an empty and incoherent placeholder for all authorized ideological and cultural values and practices other than those of the market’s “material civilization”. It is typically laughed off as evidence of the Party’s ideological incoherence in the post-reform period (X. Wang, 2002: 17). Academic studies on socialist spiritual civilization thus reaffirm the widespread assumptions of a chasm between the Party’s ideology and the reality of social change under the market reforms, and, with the exception of Tomba (2009), predict the ultimate failure of the campaign (Dirlik 1981, 1982; Anagnost, 1997b; Bakken, 2000; Dynon, 2008, 2014).

### **Problematizing the self**

The spiritual civilization framework, however, provided a comprehensive framework for the problematization and autonomous reproduction of the state-sponsored discursive regime. It

did not simply attempt to imprint the will of the state onto passive individual subjects; rather, it opened a space for pluralistic debates in the public sphere and became internalized within the reflexivity of individual subjects as they constructed their sense of self and the orientation of their lives during a time of rapid social transformation.

During the early reform-era, a perceived moral crisis was fueled by the emerging market subjectivity which legitimized the pursuit of self-interest, the normalization of utilitarian rationality (Chan, Madsen, & Unger, 1984) and the increasingly free expression, through consumption, of personal desire and freedom (Rofel, 2007; Zhang & Ong, 2008). Instrumental market values and practices penetrated all social strata, ranging from the promotion of an individual work ethic, entrepreneurialism, and the glorification of making money. At the same time, moral criticism of these attitudes and practices became pervasive, reflecting a widespread public anxiety about the moral degradation, lack of concern and civility, and corruption associated with these trends (Yan, 2009). Through the discourse of spiritual civilization, the Party appropriated these concerns into a restatement of ideological orthodoxy, deployed an institutional apparatus to support the moral critique through public debate and propaganda, and developed plans to enhance the overall “quality” of the population. Through the material/spiritual civilization dichotomy, the Party-state channeled the energies of the utilitarian “little self” (*xiaowo*) into the development of material civilization, while at the same time erecting itself as the custodian of the utopian “greater self” (*dawo*), embodying the moral consciousness of the nation.

From the 1990s, the promotion of spiritual civilization increasingly revolved around the problematization of the self and *suzhi*, the ‘quality of the population’ (Kipnis, 2006). As attested by a sizeable anthropological literature, the moral discourse of *suzhi* underwrote extremely versatile technologies of the self that aimed to reform the people into a population of well-behaved subjects who independently and voluntarily navigate the free market in an authoritarian society. *Suzhi* was a term first introduced into the Chinese lexicon through the top-down One Child Policy, which

entailed both self-regulation and a coercive biopolitics derived from cybernetic ‘control theory’ (*kongzhibilun*, Greenhalgh, 2005). The reduction of the population through birth control campaigns, forced abortions and sterilizations was deployed concurrently with the promotion of techniques of self-cultivation. *Suzhi* became a ubiquitous notion in both official and popular discourse, indexing the civilized manners, cosmopolitanism, professionalism and sophisticated consumer tastes of the modern urban citizen.

“Low *suzhi*” euphemized moral judgement of others, particularly labourers, peasants and ethnic minorities (Lin, 2011; H. Yan, 2003), while “high *suzhi*” became a mark of social distinction, as well an aspirational ideal, embodied by the good public manners and social ethics of “advanced” foreigners, such as Europeans and Japanese. *Suzhi* became a vehicle in the search for a new, middle-class urban Chinese identity that would radiate from the urban centre to the rural periphery. A panoply of technologies, interventions and aspirational communications, associated with specific forms of expertise, were deployed by a range of actors to train people to acquire higher *suzhi* or enhance the desire for *suzhi*: educational institutions, tutorial schools, human resource trainers, etiquette consultants, medical establishments, advertising agencies, psychotherapists, life coaches and so on. (Anagnost, 1997a; Cartier, 2016; W. C. Ho, 2004, 2010; Jacka, 2009; Lewis, 2002; Pan, 2006; Tomba, 2009).

Kipnis notes, however, that much of the literature ‘misses the extent to which relatively subordinated leaders and people twist an official discourse to very local ends’ (Kipnis, 2007: 395), while Sigley (2009) notes how the *suzhi* discourse can be used to contradictory ends and even turned against Party leaders themselves. In our view, the heteropraxy of *suzhi* illustrates the very dynamics of neo-socialist governmentality. The point is not that all people obediently carry out the slogans of Party-state propaganda, or, on the contrary, that they subvert it for their private goals. Rather, it is that they freely participate in the *problematization* of public and private behaviour using language furnished by official discourse. What began as a normative discourse derived from the

Party's programme of social engineering, was appropriated by all manner of public and private actors, and became a common term in everyday language, used to pass judgement on oneself and others. People participate in the Party's framing of the problem even if they have no awareness or interest in how *suzhi* fits into the broader ideological framework of socialist spiritual civilization. *Suzhi* has penetrated peoples' embodied subjectivities and desires. Precisely by this means an overlap occurs between the pursuit of private desire and ambition, and the Party's mapping out of a collective ambition for the future of a socialist Chinese civilization.

### **Problematizing culture**

What exactly constituted the "spiritual" in the construction of socialist spiritual civilization was left ambiguous and ill defined, opening a wide space for the problematization of China's culture and civilization. The fuzziness of the discourse of socialist spiritual civilization allowed it to be appropriated by intellectuals and movements across the gamut of ideological tendencies. This problematization began with intellectuals' angst at the cultural destruction brought about by the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. Laments at the loss of tradition were hard to separate from a sense that the excesses of Mao worship and revolutionary violence were the expressions of some fault in Chinese culture itself, which could only be remedied through learning from Western civilization. The "Cultural fever" (*wenhua re*), an explosion of interest in literature, philosophy and traditional culture following decades of ideological monotony, reached a first crescendo in 1986 (Chen & Jin, 1997), and gave a platform to modernists, experimentalists and writers such as the "root searching school" (J. Wang, 1996). Although expressed through the discourse of civilizational renewal, the cultural fever drew on Western philosophy and social theories to critically re-examine 'the virtues, weaknesses and possibilities of Chinese traditional culture,' and reassess the present and future relevance of Chinese civilization (Gu, 1999: 389). Throughout the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, various popular fads, crazes and spiritual movements also proliferated, and

increasingly revolved around the revalorization and modernization of Chinese culture previously condemned as feudal or superstitious. Some of these, such as the “*yijing* fever”, the “Confucianism fever”, the martial arts craze and the “*qigong* fever” gained millions of enthusiastic followers at various times (Palmer, 2007). Many explicitly employed the vocabulary of the spiritual civilization campaign (Winiger, 2018, forthcoming). Indeed, the discourse of spiritual civilization opened an ideological space within which these cultural problematizations could be pursued and these movements legitimized, as well as a framework within which they could be translated and coordinated.

For example, in mid-1984, some Chinese philosophy teachers at Peking University revived the pre-modern model of the Confucian academy, or *shuyuan*. This local initiative led to the foundation of the “International Academy of Chinese Culture” which aimed to ‘expand and propagate’ and to ‘modernize’ Chinese culture. Bringing together a number of veteran scholars, it gained the patronage of Party Secretary Hu Yaobang and was affiliated with Peking University’s Marxism-Leninism Research Society (Gu, 1999: 409, 410). Even though in the 1980s Confucianism remained ideologically suspect as a remnant of feudalism, this Academy sponsored the production of a major series of influential scholarly works on Confucian culture, stimulating academic discourses on Confucianism, which could be translated into the spiritual civilization framework. This then provided academic legitimacy to an effervescent wave of popular and grassroots movements promoting the reconstruction of lineage halls and ancestor worship, private academies, Confucian scripture recitation classes for children, classes and institutes on Classical Studies (*guoxue*) for entrepreneurs seeking to enhance their cultural capital, and revived rituals to celebrate Confucius and the Yellow Emperor. Spanning the different sectors, discourses could be circulated and translated back and forth in the languages of Party, academic and cultural authorities, under the legitimizing cover of appealing to the spiritual civilization and other official frameworks.

By the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the “Confucian fever” had become a mass phenomenon that was becoming marketized in the realms of education, leadership and management training, publishing, and lifestyle consumption, enhancing the appreciation of traditional values and culture in the cultural mainstream; it had also become a lively intellectual movement with Confucian scholars engaged in heated public debates with liberal and leftist advocates (Billioud and Thoraval, 2015). While official discourse never fully endorsed these movements, it selectively appropriated key terms that had gained currency through these activities and that were compatible with the Party’s formulation of spiritual civilization: filial piety (*xiao*), virtue (*de*), harmony (*hexie*), honesty and trust (*chengxin*), and so on (Brady, 2012: 62-68). Thus, some symbols, practices and aesthetics of the movement became politically unproblematic consumable commodities, while the Party softened and incorporated certain symbols, sentiments and aesthetics of others into the discourse of spiritual civilization, and deployed resources, policies and plans to promote the ideologically sanitized, official version of the original movement.

Some forms cannot be translated and coordinated – notably groups that became mass spiritual or religious movements – and they continue to exist, whether they are ignored, tolerated, or violently repressed. But, as a result of the process, the Party has inserted itself into the heart of movements that began at the grassroots and has absorbed their energies and concepts to enrich itself and incorporate them into its broader plans. When President Jiang Zemin emphasized the ‘excellent traditional culture’ that was to be carried forward through the construction of spiritual civilization (Jiang, 2002), it was certainly not within the Party, which had spent most of its history combatting traditional culture, whence those ‘excellent’ elements could be retrieved, but in the ebullient cultural world that had been opened by the popular movements and translated into socialist spiritual civilization.

## Problematizing society

Finally, spiritual civilization opened the space for the problematization of society itself. During the revolutionary era, the “society” of communism was a utopian horizon that could only be built by purging feudal, bourgeois and imperialist elements through class struggle. With the market reforms, the mission of the Party and of the state was redefined as representing and serving all of society, including the business class, and not only the proletariat. With the end of class struggle, “society” as a whole became a domain of discourse and intervention. The new divisions were those that separated the mainstream of society from those poorer and marginalized populations, such as peasants, ethnic minorities, the elderly, the handicapped, migrant workers, and so on – groups that were also typically stigmatized as having low *suzhi*. The goal of discourses, expertise and interventions would be to devise programs and policies to administer and integrate these populations, raising their level of economic and cultural development.<sup>2</sup>

An associated set of issues associated with the problematization of society was how to manage movements and initiatives that arise from within society itself with the goal of tackling social problems. On the one hand, the voluntaristic spirit of the revolutionary tradition, which had become exhausted after the struggles of the Cultural Revolution, needed to be re-activated, but such social energies had to be oriented away from political struggle towards depoliticized acts of service in line with the construction of spiritual civilization. On the other hand, the neo-liberal rationalities and technologies imported through transnational circulations included discourses of philanthropy, volunteering and civil society, as well as the introduction of international NGOs and a whole set of management models and ‘best practices’, introduced by overseas foundations and funders and relayed by NGO and civil society research centres in Chinese universities, which trained the burgeoning wave of grassroots initiatives into the methods of organizing and activism

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<sup>2</sup> Here, for lack of space, we will not focus on the rise of expert authorities in the various fields of the social sciences and social development, which is an essential dimension of this shift in rationalities of governance.

characterized by “international” norms of NGO practice. Under neo-socialist governmentality, the problem was how to manage this trend, creating a framework and boundaries for guiding such initiatives away from the potential political activism of liberal civil society, and transform it into forms of mobilization and organization that could be deployed by Party organs or organizations that could be counted on as reliably compliant.

Throughout the 1980s, “voluntary labour” and programmes to improve civic consciousness were organized to promote spiritual civilization in the mode of sporadic top-down campaigns. As tired shadows of Mao-era political campaigns, they failed to gain much traction among a population exhausted and disillusioned by appeals to sacrifice for the collective. In the 1990s, however, new patterns of volunteer service appeared in various cities, the outcome of localized initiatives and methods imported from NGOs from Hong Kong and overseas. A Party-managed volunteering infrastructure was built at a time when grassroots NGOs were also proliferating. It aimed to pre-emptively promote, satisfy, co-opt and guide popular desires for civic participation, creating a politically compliant “managed civil society” (Perry, 2014). With the rise of an urban middle class, increasing numbers of youth (and older generations as well) were eager to participate in service activities. Professional volunteer and NGO management techniques and best practices were studied from overseas organizations and experts and incorporated into the Party-led volunteer system which was built on the foundation of the Mao-era infrastructures of mobilization.

The Office of Spiritual Civilization, the Communist Party Youth League, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and Neighborhood Committees developed systems for identifying local needs, devising projects and activities, recruiting, registering and allocating volunteers. ‘Volunteer certificates’ were issued to registered volunteers, and participants and activities tabulated, reported, and collected by authorities charged with promoting volunteering as part of socialist spiritual civilization. This emerging infrastructure fused with that of “Learning from Lei Feng”, a soldier



idolized as an altruistic hero during the Mao-era, who now became the emblem of Party-supported volunteering (Palmer and Ning, forthcoming).

Managed civil society covers a wide range of groups of organizations that do not fit the dichotomy of the “independent” grassroots NGOs and the “corporatist” GONGOs (Government-organized NGOs) that shapes perceptions of social organizations in the PRC. In the past two decades, the distinction between these categories has become increasingly blurred (Liu and Palmer, under review). New policies for the registration of social organizations and programmes for “purchasing social services” by tender, have provided grassroots organizations with legal and legitimate roles for carrying out certain social welfare functions on behalf of the state. Engaging in the process of funding applications, monitoring and reporting transforms previously informal or precarious community groups into non-profit entrepreneurial social service organizations whose activities are funneled towards the welfare issues deemed appropriate by state funding agencies (Peng, 2016). The expert profession of social work is gradually becoming professionalized, providing social organizations and state welfare agencies with trained personnel to navigate the management of projects, programmes, regulations and funding.

In what Liu (2017) has called “NGO-based governmentality”, development programmes run by NGOs in rural areas aim to transform the conduct of peasants, using grants, incentives, and participatory methods to incite them to form self-governing cooperative economic enterprises within the framework of the campaign to build a “New Socialist Countryside” launched in 2006 (Ahlers and Schubert, 2009). In a group that we have studied, a grassroots NGO in Guangzhou founded by students from an elite high school to help the children of migrant workers, partnered with a local “Party community service centre”, a new type of Party organization designed to extend the reach of the Party into local neighbourhoods, taking on some of the functions played by community groups in the West. The student NGO, using the premises of the Party service centre, recruited student volunteers to play games with children modeled on “Monopoly”, by which they

would learn the rationalities of insurance, marketing techniques, and financial management. This case is a perfect illustration of how, under neo-socialism, the Party tries to encourage and facilitate grassroots initiatives and volunteering, co-opting groups that train people of low *suzhi* to enhance their capacity to self-manage in the market economy.

The analytical lens of neo-socialist governmentality sheds new light onto the problem of “civil society” in the PRC. The concept of civil society is derived from a classical liberal rationality of government, which posits a clear boundary between the state and society and guarantees the legal right of social groups to form autonomous associations. Since such a clear boundary and legal regime does not exist in the PRC, many scholars have denied the possibility of civil society, or severely limited its scope (Author, 2019). But the literature on governmentality has noted how the distinction between state and civil society has become blurred in the West under the neo-liberal mode through the outsourcing of social welfare and community management (Pyykkönen, 2015). Neo-liberal and neo-socialist civil society both adopt entrepreneurial and managerial methods to engage in “social innovation”, aiding corporations in “corporate social responsibility” and assisting the state in the management of marginalized populations. But while neo-liberal civil society groups may acquire the status of authorities representing communities and stakeholders, joining the decentralized and transnational network of institutions of governance, as well as the authority to “speak truth to power” and mobilize to act as a check on the overreach of the state or corporate actors, neo-socialist civil society consists of spaces of autonomy without authority, or rather, autonomy under the shadow of the Party’s authority. Neo-socialist governmentality aims to create the spaces and provide resources for voluntary mobilization and grassroots initiatives, but to orient such social forces in such a way that their agency remains expressive of the interests represented by the political regime.

## Conclusion

Neo-socialist governmentality, we have argued, is not the decentralized and contingent rationality of neo-liberalism, nor is it simply the direct imprinting of the will of the state onto passive, cynical and foot-dragging individual subjects. Rather, it operates through the opening of spaces of public discourse and collective action within which neo-socialist rationalities enter into productive tension with popular desires and cultural movements. These tensions lead to the problematization of the self, culture and society and penetrate individual subjectivities and mass movements, while reinforcing the Party's position as a transcendental authority. Through this process, civilized political subjects contribute to socialist spiritual civilization while pursuing their private desires to consume, travel, and pursue religious, sexual, cultural, and other personal interests.

Through processes of coordination and translation, the discursive and institutional framework of spiritual civilization could at the same time be enriched and expanded through its own programmes and propaganda directed towards society. The rigidity of the "harmonized" output in the form of "Party-speak" and other forms of propaganda, towards which most people are indifferent, does not, in fact, signal its failure.

Through its ritualized political formulas which are never used in contexts other than formalized official speeches, news reports and documents, Party-speak has acquired the status of a sacred language that elevates the Party to a transcendental level, not so much through its content but through its untouchability (Palmer & Winiger, 2019). This surface layer of conventional propaganda does not demand sincere belief, interest or understanding of the Party's doctrine, but simply the ritual performance of compliance through keeping a distance from its sacred powers, the perfunctory respect and upholding of taboos against publicly discussing "sensitive topics", the conforming to proper rhetorical conventions in formal contexts, the enacting of hierarchies in interaction rituals, and participation in requisite ceremonies. This performance generates a

subjectivity that experiences a chasm between personal desires and the demands of official ideology.

In this manner, the population at once conforms to and ignores the Party's demands. Indifferent to ideology, people align with the goals of neo-socialist governance in their own creative ways, which arise from their own apparently unfettered agency afforded by the gap between Party-speak and private behaviour. Whereas in revolutionary socialism the gap between propaganda and behaviour was not tolerated and compliance was forced (and ultimately, by the end of the Cultural Revolution, widely resented), neo-socialist governmentality maintains the distance between the two worlds of propaganda and social reality, while translating between and coordinating them, to the extent that both conformity and freedom serve the Party's interests.

During the Mao-era, cultural production was forced to completely serve and express the will of the Party-state; under neo-socialism, processes of translation and coordination between the Party, society and cultural movements have allowed significant autonomy and agency to the latter. This enables a pluralism of opinion but only makes the management of freedom more effective, because it is not recognized as such. Cynicism is expressed through a universal disregard for conventional, ritualized propaganda, while the rationalities of neo-socialist governmentality are obfuscated.

The non-coercive techniques of neo-socialist governmentality operate in concert with, and are often inseparable, from the other, more coercive modalities of government described by Foucault, including sovereignty (the spectacular deployment of state violence) and discipline (the external management of bodies through regimes of knowledge). Liberal government itself can only apply to those citizens who are categorized as possessing sufficient autonomy to be able to exercise self-government. Disciplinary government is required for those who are deemed unable to exercise liberal autonomy, and coercive repression is applied on those who are committed to the destruction of the liberal state (Dean, 2002). Neo-socialist government relies on the same types of

distinctions. In addition, since it relies on circuits of coordination around a transcendental centre, non-coercive governmentality cannot apply to those social actors who actively resist or undermine those circuits. In those cases, increasingly coercive interventions are deployed to impose socialist spiritual civilization on refractory populations, notably religious or ethnic communities such as Tibetan Buddhist or Muslim communities “infiltrated” by “separatist” or “terrorist” elements, or to crush and eliminate groups such as Falun Gong or political dissidents who categorically reject the entire discursive infrastructure of translation and coordination.

Under neo-socialism, both coercive and non-coercive technologies of government aim to uphold the transcendental authority of the Party, to coordinate and stabilize the potential fragmentation of centrifugal rationalities. The proliferation of alternative networks of coordination, whether emanating domestically or from abroad, thus poses an existential threat to the Party and is countered with both coercive and non-coercive forms of power.

From a governmentality perspective, the evolution of neo-socialism is not merely a question of increasing or decreasing freedom in a zero-sum game. We are led instead to consider the strategies and techniques by which freedom is simultaneously produced, circumscribed and managed, and the interplay between coercive and non-coercive forms of government under the perception of increasing internal and external threats. From this perspective, the reign of Xi Jinping has not signaled a turn away from the supposed liberalizing trends of the reform era, but an amplification and increasing sophistication of the infrastructures of neo-socialist governance, both non-coercive and coercive, that had been gradually deployed over the past four decades.

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