

# *The Evolution of Symbolic Power in Modern China: Assimilation and Exclusion Dynamics from the Qing Dynasty to Present*

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**Keywords:** Symbolic Power, Political Sociology, State Formation, Assimilation, Exclusion, Confucianism, Communism, Infrastructural Power, China, Cultural Revolution

**Abstract:** This paper examines the evolution of symbolic power in modern China from the Qing Dynasty to the present. By analyzing theories from scholars like Bourdieu, Loveman, Gorski, and Weber, it explores how symbolic power shapes societal structures, cultural narratives, and collective identities. The study delves into the interaction between symbolic power and state formation, focusing on the dynamics of assimilation and exclusion. Through case studies, including the Cultural Revolution and the repression of Uyghurs in northwestern region of China, it highlights the mechanisms of symbolic power in maintaining and contesting social hierarchies. The paper also discusses the role of infrastructural power in these processes and compares the use of symbolic power during significant political shifts. The findings reveal that symbolic power, combined with military force, plays a crucial role in China's centralization of power and consolidation of state control, impacting both individual perceptions and institutional practices.

## **1. Introduction**

Symbolic power holds immense importance in political sociology, playing a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of states and societal structures. It influences how individuals perceive and interact within their social environment, framing cultural narratives, defining collective identities, and marginalizing dissenting voices to construct the very fabric of society. Moreover, symbolic power operates subtly, dictating not only the rules but also the essence of societal dynamics.

## **2. The Concept of Symbolic Power**

Symbolic power, as discussed by different scholars such as Bourdieu, Loveman, Gorski, and Weber, is the covert ability to shape perceptions, categorizations, and societal structures. Bourdieu, for instance, emphasizes the role of symbolic power in granting individuals the right to claim rights, with citizenship serving as its cornerstone. Loveman extends this concept to the state, highlighting its ability in naturalizing authority and practices, which Gorski further explores by emphasizing the state's ability to shape perceptions of its power as legitimate. Mitchell's study emphasizes its role in shaping societal understanding beyond mere politics.

Operating within the realm of the two-dimensional view of power, symbolic power intricately shapes perceptions, influences decision-making processes, and obscures underlying power structures by framing issues, mobilizing bias, and shaping what is considered legitimate or illegitimate. It determines what issues are visible, what grievances are expressed, and what interests are articulated, ultimately impacting the distribution and exercise of power within society.

It is important to understand symbolic power as it unveils the mechanisms through which social hierarchies are maintained and contested within the state, shedding light on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within societies. Symbolic power influences not only individual perceptions but also institutional practices, shaping the very framework through which societal norms and values are constructed and maintained [1].

Understanding the development of symbolic power provides crucial insights into its evolution over time and its interaction with changes in social or political structures. Loveman's piece on primitive accumulation illustrates how symbolic power accumulates through a continuous cycle of co-optation, usurpation, innovation, and imitation, shaping and relying on existing administrative structures. Additionally, symbolic power creates categories and thus groups and boundaries, according to Bourdieu. States often construct new categories and classification practices to naturalize their rule, encouraging civilians to adopt the state's categories in their thinking and behavior. This process facilitates state legitimacy by making social distinctions appear natural and constructing boundaries that reinforce state authority. Luft and Thompson's piece on state symbolic power and legibility exemplifies this, demonstrating how top-down efforts to reshape societal boundaries are complied with yet not convincingly accepted, provoking contestation over time in Rwanda [2]. This case study of conflicts over the boundaries and nature of state involvement in shaping social life also highlights the efficiency of the use of symbolic power within the state depending on evolving political contexts.

## **2.1. Gaps in Current Research**

However, while all the authors mentioned above discuss symbolic power implicitly as they examine how it develops, they do not really focus on how symbolic power evolves over time. The existing papers are more focused on how symbolic power is wielded, but not on how it changes or what changes. Therefore, there is a gap to further explore symbolic power — to what extent is symbolic power temporal and how it develops over time should be more explicitly theorized.

## **2.2. Impact of Political Shifts**

As symbolic power does not develop in isolation, its evolution must involve interactions with other factors. Therefore, the relationship between the development of the political structure of the state and the development of symbolic power should be further studied, as symbolic power may directly impact how the state forms and develops, thereby determining the use of symbolic boundaries that result in measures of assimilation and exclusion. The changes in political structures are typically observed during the phase of state formation, as this is the moment when the state adopts the mechanisms through which power should be wielded and societal norms should be constructed. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study how symbolic power functions and evolves, particularly during this time or other significant political structural shifts.

## **2.3. Assimilation and Exclusion Dynamics**

In this paper, I aim to delve deeper into this intriguing aspect of symbolic power, specifically in terms of assimilation and exclusion dynamics. Questions such as whether symbolic power operates similarly across different eras, or if societal shifts bring about nuanced changes, will be discussed. I believe that examining how inclusion and exclusion are enacted through symbolic power during

significant political structural shifts, such as the transition from empires to nation-states, is an interesting topic to explore. It can provide a more complete view of the evolving nature of symbolic power and how the means to wield symbolic power may differ depending on the political context and objectives, and this aspect has yet to be fully explored by sociologists.

### **3. Case Study: The Evolution of Symbolic Power in Modern China**

In order to delve further into the development and shift of symbolic power within the context of state formation, particularly regarding assimilation or exclusion dynamics, I focus specifically on China—more precisely, Modern China spanning from the Qing Dynasty to the present century. The rationale behind selecting China as a case study is straightforward: it is unique. While studies in the Western context on symbolic power and state development trajectories may not fully capture China's complexity, the nation still shares certain similarities with them. Unlike colonial states such as India (Berda), Portugal (Tilly), Palestine (Sabbagh-Khoury), and African states (Herbst), China has only experienced limited colonization, primarily evident in cases like Hong Kong, China and Taiwan, China; which represent a small portion of the nation. Additionally, internal conflicts, akin to those seen in Latin America (Centeno), persist as demands for reforms were seen from the Empire in the Qing Dynasty all the way to today's nation-state. Moreover, unlike those nation-states where the symbolic power seems to be primarily determined by the expansion or contraction of the territory, China's symbolic power seems to totally depend on the ruling parties and the political structure. With its prevailing communist ideologies, China stands out for its centralized power structure, bolstered by strong infrastructural and symbolic power, making itself a state resilient to the critiques and dissatisfaction yet unique and worthy of studying. Thus, examining the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization within such a context is intriguing as it offers a nuanced understanding of how symbolic power operates within a state experiencing several big political structural shifts characterized by both historical continuity and rapid modernization. Based on this, the big question can be asked: What is the role of symbolic power in the structural shift of Chinese politics, and how does it play a role in the measures of assimilation and exclusion during the consolidation of power in the nation-state?

The transition from an empire to a nation-state marks a profound shift in China's socio-political landscape. As discussed by Mabel Berezin, Emily Sandusky, and Thomas Davidson, an empire is characterized by extensive territorial control over diverse regions and peoples, embodies a centralized authority exerted over a heterogeneous population through conquest, coercion, or assimilation. In contrast, a nation-state, with its recognized territorial boundaries and distinct national identity, signifies a shift towards sovereignty and self-determination. This evolution reflects China's journey from a sprawling empire during the Qing Dynasty, which encompassed diverse cultures and ethnicities, to a cohesive nation-state with a defined political unit seen nowadays. The emergence of a distinct national identity, intertwined with shared symbols, traditions, and values, fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity among the Chinese population. This shift reflects China's journey towards sovereignty and self-determination, marked by the consolidation of power, the establishment of political institutions, and the fostering of a distinct national identity.

#### **3.1. Symbolic Power in the Qing Empire**

Starting with the symbolic power within the Qing Empire, in the Qing dynasty, symbolic power manifested through the strategic adoption and utilization of Confucian ideology by the ruling Manchus, as discussed by Spence in his book "The Search For Modern China" [3]. This symbolic power operated on multiple levels, influencing perceptions, beliefs, and values through cultural symbols, particularly those derived from Confucian principles. The integration of Confucianism into

governance structures, legal codes, and bureaucratic practices served to legitimize the authority of the Manchu rulers and shape the behavior of both the ruling elite and the general population. One implication of symbolic power in the Qing dynasty was its role in assimilation. By embracing Confucianism—a belief system deeply ingrained in Chinese culture—the Manchu elite sought to gain acceptance and legitimacy among the predominantly Han Chinese population (Crossley). The incorporation of Confucian principles into governance strategies and bureaucratic practices facilitated the assimilation of the Manchus into Chinese society, fostering stability and cohesion within the empire. This assimilation was not only symbolic but also practical, as Confucianism provided a framework for effective governance and social order, aligning the ruling elite with the cultural norms and values of the Han majority. However, the utilization of symbolic power in the Qing dynasty also had implications for exclusion. While the integration of Confucianism helped to unify the diverse population under a shared cultural identity, it also reinforced hierarchical social structures and norms that favored the ruling elite. The emphasis on filial piety, social hierarchy, and moral conduct, inherent in Confucian ideology, perpetuated systems of privilege and exclusion, where the ruling elite maintained their dominance over subordinate groups. Additionally, the civil service examinations, based on Confucian teachings, served as a mechanism for social mobility but also reinforced exclusionary practices by privileging those with access to education and resources. Therefore, for the Qing Empire, symbolic power played a significant role in both assimilation and exclusion. While the adoption of Confucianism helped to integrate the ruling elite into Chinese society and foster stability, it also perpetuated hierarchical social structures and exclusionary practices that reinforced the dominance of the ruling elite.

Therefore, during the Qing dynasty, symbolic power served as both a force for assimilation and exclusion, yet it was practical in consolidating the Empire's power as it legitimized the Manchus' sovereignty. Confucianism, the symbolic power in this case, had a relationship of "growth and return like a seed" with the nation-state, reflecting how the adoption of Confucian principles was not just a one-time transfer of power but a process of cultivation yielding long-term benefits. This is based on the fact that the ideology is not simply an instrumental tool for the ruling class—the Manchus anymore, but also a pursuit they willingly comply with, recognizing its justness and efficiency. By embracing and complying with Confucianism, the Manchus sought legitimacy among the Han Chinese majority and themselves as the ruling class, fostering stability within the Qing Dynasty. The symbolic power held within the empire thus resulted in voluntary compliance, resonating with Mann's understanding of infrastructural power, which is "the ability of public officials to achieve their goals through coordinated administrative actions and collaborative relationships with civil society actors." (1986,P113) Unlike the examples Mann raised on the failure of France and the Netherlands, where the state failed to create a hostile environment as a means for exclusion due to limited infrastructure power, both assimilation and exclusion within the Qing empire was inherent in the power itself, yet it was self-naturalized as the ideologies of Confucianism compelled the state and its actors to willingly comply with the rule.

### **3.2. Transformation of Symbolic Power in Modern China**

In early 20th-century China, symbolic power underwent a notable transformation with the political reform, transitioning from serving as a dual force for assimilation and exclusion within the Qing dynasty to assuming a more dynamic and assertive role in shaping the emerging nation-state, as seen in the ideologies of Communism. Unlike Confucianism, which has a long history and is studied not just for its practicality within Chinese culture but also as a heritage from ancestors, Communism is rooted in the ideology of reform, aimed at effecting changes. Thus, compared to Confucianism, it has less consolidation and faces more refusal and opposition. The way Communism prevails also differs

from Confucianism. While both penetrate through the educational system and bureaucracy, Confucianism places more emphasis on systematic structures and etiquettes, on how the bureaucracy should be run, whereas Communism focuses more on the actual content and knowledge delivered to individuals and societies, on what people learn and think within the bureaucracy.

Unlike the assimilation driven by Confucianism during the Qing dynasty, assimilation under Communism was more coercive and authoritarian, reflecting the state's centralized power and its determination to enforce conformity. Accordingly, the advocacy of such ideology resulted in a more radical approach, especially evident in the case of the Cultural Revolution, where all individuals identified as non-supporters of Communism were subjected to torture and death, representing an overt means of exclusion by the state. The state seems to symbolize a campaign for reform under Mao's sovereignty, rather than a place to inhabit and offer protections to its people, but it demands that people make changes collectively, which can be seen as corresponding to the idea of "innovation" according to Loveman's accumulation model. Therefore, there is an obvious difference between the Qing state and this Communist state; while both are meant to protect their people and maintain their rights as what is naturally seen as their obligation, the former expects diversity within its people based on the same conviction in Confucianism ideologies, while the latter expects a brand new appearance with all the people convinced and compliant to its Communist doctrines. People's expectations of these two states thus differed; under Manchu rule, the state was meant to create an inclusive society aligned with Confucianism ideologies. However, for this Communist state, it seems people do not really know what to expect on how the state should be run except for an ideal new nation-state prompted by Mao, who physically oppressed and eliminated any defenders of his own.

### 3.3. Comparison of Symbolic Power across Eras

In this context, symbolic power exhibits a different kind of infrastructural power compared to the Qing empire, as it operates through a top-down approach that not all social actors are happy with. This power typically emanates from centralized sources such as governments and other influential social actors, shaping the interactions, opportunities, and constraints within society. However, over time, the flow of infrastructural power can change dramatically. In the Qing state, this flow of power is closely adherent to the bureaucratic system and protected by it. Yet, during Mao's era, the flow may deviate due to factors such as corruption within the state and "guanxi" between individuals—a network built on trust where officials may accumulate infrastructural power as entities. While regional connections were present in the Qing empire, they were mainly based on networks that followed the Confucian ideologies. In contrast, Mao's state utilized media such as the famous little red books, radios, and posters to impose practices of infrastructural power. Unlike the natural accumulation seen in the empire, the nation-state actively propelled the accumulation of symbolic power, yet it remained self-sufficient. Despite such an imposition of ideologies on society rather than being learned, they persisted for decades, and state power remained centralized.

Unlike the relationship of "growing and returning like a seed," where the nation-state was seen as a gradual assimilation of Qing Confucianism, in this new context the symbolic authority of communism was like sowing after removing all previous seeds, erasing all traces of the past by means, while accepting only what it introduced. This practice mirrors the concept of elimination seen in settler colonialism [4], albeit with obvious features. While the idea that the Chinese are Han is itself a form of assimilation, since China is a nation-state with 56 ethnic minorities, it is important to note that there are no visible minorities in China from a political point of view, because all the people involved in the political movement are Chinese citizens despite different ethnicities. Unlike minorities such as the Israelis and Palestinians discussed in Sabbagh-Khoury's work, the differences between Chinese political parties at the time depended entirely on their beliefs and political views,



instead of their ethnic identity. It is clear, therefore, that the effort to remove existing plants before new seeds are planted requires, in addition to ideological and political force, military power and symbolic power, with the former as a means of forced assimilation and exclusion and the latter as a justification for it.

### **3.4. Role of Military Power in Symbolic Power Dynamics**

It is therefore interesting to get to the conclusion that the interaction between military power and symbolic power is a common combination for China to centralize its power since the formation of the nation-state shifted from the empire. This seems to contradict the common notion that within the empire, which often consists of a dominant core region and various subordinate territories or colonies, governance typically involves centralized authority exerted over a heterogeneous population, often through mechanisms of conquest, coercion, or assimilation. However, this was not the case for the Manchu's rule of the Qing empire. Conversely, it is the nation-state that involves different military measures to enforce compliance and accumulate symbolic power, as seen in the example of the Cultural Revolution [5]. Throughout the development of Modern China, the period starting from when it was formally viewed as a nation-state, the element of military power, more specifically the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is undeniable. From the top-down approach of Mao's political reform to the economic reform, the military element is never absent in China's symbolic power, as if they are inseparable.

### **3.5. Repression of Uyghurs in the Northwestern Region: A Case Study**

One good example of this inseparable relationship between symbolic power and military power within China would be the state's repression of Uyghurs in its northwestern region, where the Chinese government has labeled any expression of Islam as extremist [6]. With the excuse of economic reform, many Islam Uyghurs arbitrarily detained were forced to work. ASPI estimates that between 2017 and 2020, 80,000 previously detained Uyghurs were sent to factories across China associated with 83 global brands (Council on Foreign Relations 2022). Researchers at the Center for Strategic and International Studies said forced labor is an important part of the government's economic development plan for the northwestern region of China, which includes turning it into a textile and clothing manufacturing hub. Chinese officials describe the policy as "poverty alleviation." This is similar to the state's use of exclusionary measures observed in Pakistan through the exclusion of the Ahmadiyya community [7], where religious groups pressured the state to classify Ahmadiyya community members as non-Muslims due to differences in beliefs and practices, particularly regarding the finality of prophethood within Sunni Islamic orthodoxy. Consequently, the state responded by enacting more religious-based laws, further marginalizing the Ahmadiyya community.

However, the exclusion of Ahmadiyya is due to the fact that the state wants to please the majority of its population, yet the repression of Uyghurs is the state wanting to please itself but using the excuse of pleasing the Hans, the majority population of China. This main difference leads to the different measures the state takes to achieve exclusion, with Palestine using legal laws, yet China using military measures where nearly 200 died in riots that broke out in Urumqi, the capital of this region with significant Uyghur population, in 2009. This case showed that besides doing the work of assimilation and marginalization, the symbolic power of the state is also used to redefine cultural and religious identities. By portraying Islam as a threat and justifying repression under the guise of economic reform and poverty alleviation, the state aims to erode Uyghur cultural and religious identity while reinforcing the dominance of Han Chinese culture. Other than military power, China's symbolic power is in the consolidation of state control and the marginalization of minority groups by shaping perceptions, beliefs, and identities in line with the interests of the ruling authorities. It clearly shows how symbolic power serves as a tool for the nation-state to maintain social cohesion, reinforce

hierarchies, and legitimize policies of exclusion and repression.

#### 4. Infrastructural Power and Its Impact on Symbolic Power

Comparing the application of both symbolic power and infrastructural power as a set seen in the Qing empire, there's more military means seen in the process of assimilation and exclusion without infrastructural power. It is thus interesting to understand if the presence of infrastructural power has any effect on the way of assimilation and exclusion done by symbolic power by the nation-state.

Infrastructural power is the ability of public officials to achieve their goals through coordinated administrative actions and collaborative relationships with civil society actors [8]. Both the Cultural Revolution and the repression of Uyghurs lack infrastructural power, as the former neglects relationships with civil society actors and all attempts are imposed directly by the state, and administrative actions are rarely coordinated, even if social actors want them to be, due to the chaotic nature of the situation and the constantly evolving Communist ideologies, as Mao sought to perpetuate a state of reform indefinitely. For the latter, there's a lack of collaborative relationships with civil society actors, as such repression is not made public and thus rarely known by the masses.

One example with a good presence of infrastructural power is the administrative practice of civil registration. It also functions as a means of exclusion, but not in a military approach, but rather a political and economic one. In the post-Mao era, there is a large amount of migratory population from rural areas to Beijing as more economic opportunities are available in the urban areas as a result of economic reform advocated by Deng. However, similar to exclusionary immigration policies seen in European states, the Chinese state is unwilling to recognize these people as proper citizens in Beijing due to the limited accessible resources, making it challenging for them to find housing and access resources [9]. However, the state did not take any military measures to chase them away but excluded them by portraying them as dangerous people with a negative impression. The symbolic power exerted by the nation-state here is thus doing the classification job and shaping the preferences of the urban population to create a hostile environment [10] for these rural populations. Such classification does not merely describe, reflect, or represent social order but also shape and reshape power relations between different groups (Bourdieu). The exclusion efforts exerted by the state's symbolic power are successful, with the cooperative relationship with different state actors.

#### 5. Conclusion

The symbolic power in this context refers to the ability of the state to shape perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes among the urban population regarding rural migrants. Symbolic power is exercised through the portrayal of these migrants as dangerous or undesirable individuals, thereby influencing the preferences and behaviors of the urban population towards them. This seems to be the same role the state's symbolic power played in the repression of Uyghurs, only with the variable of the level of participation of the masses. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that with the involvement of infrastructural power, China is more likely to use symbolic power and ideologies as a means to centralize and consolidate its power and sovereignty, yet military power is likely to get involved only if the nation-state lacks infrastructural power.

#### 6. Further Discussions and Implications

However, this conclusion still needs to be verified, or more cases are needed to increase its validity, as the symbolic exclusion of the migratory population instead of a military exclusion may also be interpreted by the fact that it is due to economic reasons. The urban areas need a labor supply for those uneasy and dangerous jobs that only the migratory population are willing to do, so the state is unable to use military measures as they rely on their labor. If so, the ideological approach of the symbolic power exerted by the nation-state is not due to the presence of infrastructural power that

they do not want to do, but due to the fact they are unable to do it. It is thus interesting to think if the repression of the Uyghurs is made known within the nation-state and the Hans are willing to cooperate to maximize their interest and they will exclude the Uyghurs spontaneously, will China still physically suppress them and receive international criticism?

Based on the symbolic power seen in the Qing empire, 19th-century China, and the post-Mao era, it is likely to result in a mild form of assimilation and exclusion if ideological power and political power are sufficient for the nation-state to centralize and consolidate its power. On the other hand, when the state lacks infrastructural power, military power is likely to be its substitute and is therefore imposed to accumulate and exert symbolic power. Attempting to relate it back to the shift in China's political structure, it seems that within a stable political structure like the early Qing dynasty and the post-Mao era, where more emphasis was placed on state development, the state is likely to be stable and thus have more infrastructural power. The Cultural Revolution and the repression of Uyghurs, however, occurred during Mao's advocacy for reforms, resulting in more social movements, and the nation-state is more likely to use military power as China's nation-state power relies mainly on its military capacity instead of its people.

Building upon these insights collected from historical and contemporary manifestations of symbolic power in China, it becomes evident that a deeper exploration of the interplay between symbolic power, infrastructural power, and military power is essential for understanding the complexities of governance and social dynamics. To further understand the evolution of symbolic power within the nation-state, dynasties with more wartime and less stability, like the Han dynasty, should be studied. Moreover, nation-states that relied less on military power, like Singapore, should be examined regarding the relationship between infrastructural power and the means of exclusion and assimilation that the state's symbolic power exerted. The question of the relationship between infrastructural power and military power is also worth considering, as they seem to be interchangeable substitutes in this paper.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Macalester College for establishing the courses ASIA 275 The Rise of Modern China (with Professor Coplin) and SOCI 370 Political Sociology (with Professor Larson), which give me a precious opportunity to conduct this research. I would like to thank Professor Eric Larson in giving me honest and pertinent advice and pointing out areas of improvement in the article.

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