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Jonathan Hassid and Bartholomew C Watson

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State of mind: Power, time zones and symbolic state centralization

Jonathan Hassid

China Research Centre, University of Technology,
Sydney, Australia

Bartholomew C. Watson

Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, Iowa
City, IA USA

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Abstract

Why does China, geographically the third largest country in the world, have only one time zone, while Australia, nearly as big, has six? Concentrating on the Chinese case, we argue that control over time zones represents an example of “symbolic centralization,” the degree to which the central state concentrates intangible or symbolic resources that reinforce and assert state control, often invisibly, over people’s everyday lives. Few state actions shape citizens’ quotidian experience as fundamentally as symbolic action like setting the boundaries of time, yet political scientists have generally elided the implications of temporal authority. And those few scholars who discuss symbolic power in a systematic way have not considered how its degree of concentration varies cross-nationally. Symbolic centralization provides insights into how a distant political center may continue to shape fundamental aspects of daily life even while scoring low on resource-oriented quantitative measures of centralism. Using qualitative data and introducing a new quantitative “symbolic centralization” index, this article disaggregates the concept from the more commonly studied fiscal and political centralization through evidence from both conventional and anomalous cases.

Keywords

Centralization, time zones, symbolic power, Chinese politics, decentralization

Corresponding author:

Jonathan Hassid, China Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123 Broadway, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia.

Email: jonathan.hassid@uts.edu.au

“By symbols, accordingly, is man guided and commanded, made happy, made wretched.”

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833), Book III

Introduction

After decades of study, decentralization remains a hot topic in political science despite a growing acknowledgement that current theory is seriously flawed. Rodden (2004), for example, has complained that “distinctions between various shades of decentralization and federalism have not been taken seriously,” and most research on these topics continues to “focus exclusively on the balance of expenditures and revenues between governments” (p. 482). Wibbels (2006) agrees, arguing that “Above and beyond the dynamic relations among institutions, a broader approach to decentralization would have to begin with the underlying political dynamics in societies” (p. 182).

Despite this realization, however, most studies continue to rely almost exclusively on fiscal decentralization, which measures the percentage of government spending or revenue made at the subnational level. By this rubric, for example, China rates as one of the most decentralized countries in the world despite the power of the centrally directed Chinese Communist Party (CCP); the United Kingdom, by contrast, appears to be highly centralized despite the recent devolution of subnational parliaments with significant autonomy. Many scholars recognize that fiscal measures alone inadequately describe the power vested in the central state but lack the conceptual and empirical tools to systematically describe how and why. What fiscal and other measures of (de)centralization miss is a critical dimension we call “symbolic centralization.”

Symbolic centralization is the degree to which the central state holds the monopoly on symbolic resources, those that in the words of Bourdieu hold the power to “constitute the given” (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991: 170). Symbolic centralization differs from its political or administrative counterparts in being concerned primarily with identity politics and national self-conception rather than fights over financial resources or public behavior. These fights are not purely in the realm of culture, however, and as the theoretical discussion and case studies below will show, the central state and its regions engage in numerous conflicts over the levers of symbolic power. To control symbolic power, states must rely on the “relationships of communication” that support and mutually reinforce other forms of authority, rather than simply relying on legal authority alone (Foucault, 2001

[1982]: 337). We argue that these tools constitute a variety of intangible or symbolic resources that reinforce and assert state control, often invisibly, over people's everyday lives. We also aim to measure the degree of state symbolic centralization by introducing a new index based on factors split between state and regional assertions of symbolic power. This index is backed by qualitative examples throughout, mostly taken from the case of China.

In advancing the concept of symbolic centralization, we follow the inspiration of Scott (1986), who has memorably argued that "thousands upon thousands of petty acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef" upon which "the ship of state runs aground" (p. 8). We turn this formulation on its head, however, and concentrate on the thousands of everyday acts and symbols – like control over time zones – that together naturalize and reinforce the superstructure of state power over everyday life.

The power of symbols

Below, we offer a theoretical discussion. As this explanation can be a bit abstract, we also have produced a new quantitative measure and have grounded the discussion in a case study of China. Together, these elements suggest the central importance of investigating variation in how symbolic power is contested, centralized, and deployed. These contributions also underline that symbolic centralization is a fundamentally political concept, a relationship that is constantly in flux as political actors contest the levers of symbolic power. Although veiled, these forms of control can have consequences for identity formation, interest aggregation, and other topics routinely examined in the social sciences.

Disaggregating symbolic centralization from its commonly studied cousins of fiscal, administrative, and political (de)centralization allows a more nuanced view of cases that are anomalous under current theories. It is hard to reconcile, for example, China's extreme fiscal decentralization (ranking a full 2.17 standard deviations above the international average for the percentage of state expenditures spent subnationally) (World Bank, 2001)¹ with the fact that the regime unquestionably remains "a centralized, unitary system in which power at lower levels derives from grants at the center" (Nathan, 2003: 13).

The current, fiscally centered models of centralization do not account for a government powerful yet with porous oversight over local state expenditures. Although China's central government has strict mandates over how local governments collect and spend their money, in practice central oversight of these expenditures is troubled.² Indeed, controlling local

government action is Beijing's constant preoccupation.³ By measuring fiscal centralization alone, then, China *seems* to fit current models: political scientists Garrett and Rodden (2001), for example, find that "countries with larger *area* are significantly more decentralized" (p. 23, emphasis in original). The power of the CCP, however, and the obeisance of local officials at all levels ensure that Beijing remains at the apex of the Chinese political system even as a tiny bureaucracy of only 52,000 central-level officials grapples with controlling China's 32 million public servants (Fock and Wong, 2007). Beijing's unquestioned supremacy directly contradicts the expectations of the fiscal federalism literature, which finds the central governments of large, fiscally dispersed countries – especially those with high personnel decentralization – have trouble projecting authority into the periphery. Recent explanations for this puzzle have emphasized the importance of internal CCP mandates (Birney, 2010) or personnel hierarchies (Landry, 2008), but symbolic power clearly plays an important role as well.

We aim to unpack this tangled web and investigate how states – deliberately or not – distribute and shape symbolic power. Studying symbolic power through the lens of political conflict over the centralization of specific policies allows greater analytical insight into the tangible tools that political actors use to wield symbolic power. More concretely, few state actions shape citizens' quotidian experience as fundamentally as setting the boundaries of time, yet social scientists have generally elided the political implications of temporal authority. A few social scientists have recognized the "tremendous symbolic significance of the calendar" (Zerubavel, 1981: 82) but have not systematically applied this insight to state power. Of course, even the most powerful cannot control time itself, nor has "machine time" replaced the "temporality of the body, the earth and the cosmos" (Adam, 2004: 116). But authorities' desire to "regulate it and inculcate time discipline," itself "encompasses useful knowledge, knowledge to maintain and enhance power, be it the sovereign's, the church's or employers' power" (Adam, 2004: 103–104). Indeed, power is often at the heart of the matter as "The history of time reckoning also suggest that new political systems tended to bring about changes in the appropriation of time: 'new times' in the double meaning of the word," writes Adam (2004: 111). While recognizing the important debates around time and its thorny theoretical conceptions, in this paper we conceive of time as most states do: as 'clock time,' a purely utilitarian way to regulate society (and the day).⁴

While control over time zones can be an important component of symbolic centralization, it is not alone. Subnational or regional assemblies (particularly those with low autonomy), regional flags, local languages,

currencies, or anthems, and even domestic sports teams can also play an important role in a state's efforts to centralize or decentralize its symbolic power, power upon which rests "its ideological, economic, political *and* military functions" (Loveman, 2005: 1652, emphasis in original).

The "dinosaur model" of having a small central "brain" control a vast bureaucratic "body" (Wong, 2011) has been successful in China in part because the CCP has fostered a fierce nationalism in which powerful symbols like "Beijing Time" play an important role. Hourly reinforcement in the countryside and in distant cities alike of Beijing's temporal primacy helps reinforce national unity under an all-powerful central government. China scholar Gilley (2004) notes that "In a hangover from the imperial era, Beijing has long imposed a single time zone (Greenwich plus eight) on the whole country as a symbol of unity" (p. 168). This "tendency to apply a single standard of time throughout the entire country even when that country is exceptionally wide" – like China – "is to be found only in societies that... strive toward political centralization," writes Sociologist Zerubavel (1982), but this is a centralization not captured by current models (p. 21).

Note that we distinguish symbolic centralization from the strength of national identity. The United States, for example, has maintained a secure and cohesive sense of identity since its national founding, despite a costly civil war. As Spillman (1997) documents, although built from a diverse collection of groups and nationalities, the United States retains a strong sense of national identity, in part through commemorations and shared ideas of nationhood. Despite this powerful sense of nationalism, however, the American central government does not monopolize symbolic capital, and the US states often retain powerful symbolic resources of their own. The Texas government, for example, is particularly well known for emphasizing its unique symbols and heritage, the California state flag remains that of the short-lived independent California Republic, and many states' educational curricula mandate students learn state history. Australian states, similarly, take care to preserve their symbolic identities and resources despite most citizens' strong sense of a unified national Australian identity (Spillman, 1997).

Together these cases demonstrate that symbolic centralization, and symbols more generally, are only one factor in the formation of national or ethnic identities. Kaufman (2001) argues that the core of identity is the "myth-symbol complex" (p. 25). We agree with Kaufman; the key to understanding the relationship between national identity and symbolism rests in understanding the context of symbolic politics, and how symbols are contested, controlled, and utilized. Next we turn to a key political arena over symbols: central/regional relations.

Symbolic centralization in context

Despite hundreds of studies on decentralization, many scholars have left the term undefined, and, oddly, most have virtually ignored its forlorn antonym. For some, decentralization is a normative imperative, and a “near panacea” with “extravagant” claims (Samoff, 1990: 513). One report, for example, refers to it as “the key that unlocks the potential of schools to improve the quality of education” (Samoff, 1990: 513, quoting a World Bank report). Where decentralization *is* defined, it often means simply *fiscal* decentralization, measured by the share of state expenditures spent at the subnational level (Davoodi and Zou, 1998; Fisman and Gatti, 2002; Prud’Homme, 1995). Although fiscal decentralization is intuitive and easily calculable, it clearly does not encompass all possible forms.

The conceptual muddle around defining (de)centralization, in turn, has led to a cottage industry based around simply clarifying what decentralization actually means. Political scientist Treisman (2002) has proposed among the most comprehensive systems, advancing six types of decentralization, all of which are at least marginally related to political issues: vertical decentralization, or the number of tiers a state system has; decision-making decentralization, which “focuses on how the authority to make political decisions is distributed among different tiers” (p. 6); appointment decentralization, “concern[ing] the level at which officials at different tiers are selected and dismissed” (p. 10); electoral decentralization, or “the proportion of tiers at which direct elections are held to pick executives” (p. 11); fiscal decentralization; and personnel decentralization, measuring how personnel are distributed among the different tiers. Aaron Schneider has taken a slightly different tack by inductively conceptualizing decentralization, ultimately settling on three dimensions: fiscal; administrative, (corresponding to Treisman’s decision-making decentralization); and political (analogous to Treisman’s electoral decentralization) (Schneider, 2003). Even with these typologies, Rodden complains, “attempts to define and measure decentralization have focused primarily on fiscal and to a lesser extent policy and political authority” (Rodden, 2004: 482).

Without disputing the usefulness of these and other typologies, they do not capture the nuances of a central government’s efforts to rename streets in a restive province or introduce new currency that emphasizes national unity.⁵ How, for example, would current theory categorize Saskatchewan Canada’s 1966 Time Act setting a standard time zone for most of the province but allowing the western sections to decide locally on what time zone to follow (CBC Staff, 2010), or Brazil’s failed 2009 Senate proposal to implement a single time zone in the vast country, despite local objections and a

persistent tendency toward decentralization on other dimensions in recent decades?⁶ Cases like these represent neither fiscal nor political change in the degree of centralization, yet have real consequences for ordinary people and the state itself.

Although the examples listed are primarily concerned with the politics of time, we would be remiss to ignore politics of space. Indeed, as May and Thrift (2001) note, “time is irrevocably bound up with the spatial construction of society (and vice versa)” (p. 3). China is much bigger than most countries, and the tall, narrow United Kingdom could hardly justify having more than one time zone. Given their size, larger countries or multinational entities like the EU may find it easier to rely on symbolic centralization rather than potentially more costly fiscal or administrative forms.⁷ Concentrating on national land area, alone, however, ignores the wide variation of centralization among similarly sized states.

Taking symbolic centralization as both a separate concept from symbolic power and as a missing attribute within the broad concept of (de)centralization has utility for future conceptual innovation, most notably in the creation of diminished subtypes (Collier and Levitsky, 1997: 437–442). By aiding in differentiation, while avoiding conceptual stretching, more nuanced diminished subtypes of state centralization have utility both in debates over “essentially contested concepts” and in focusing analysis toward appropriate cases (Gallie, 1956). In the sections below, we first discuss countries that conform to traditional patterns before moving into those anomalous cases that strengthen the case for differentiating symbolic from traditional decentralization.

Symbolic centralization in the literature

Scholars who have worked in the past on symbolic power have generally focused their conceptual efforts on defining and separating it from other forms of political authority (e.g., Mann, 1986). Accordingly, those researchers who discuss symbolic power in a systematic way (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991; Loveman, 2005) have not considered how its degree of centralization varies cross-nationally. Previous approaches, like Foucault’s work on “governmentality,” rely heavily on philosophical treatments of state power. Foucault, 2006 [1979] notes that state centralization involves questions of “how to be ruled, how strictly, by whom, to what end, by what methods, and so on,” questions that move beyond centralization of administrative and fiscal power to cover spiritual issues as well (p. 132). In short, “the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics” (Foucault, 2006 [1979]: 137). Or as Mann (1986) puts it, “to monopolise norms is a route to power,”

power which the state gains by creating “the concepts and categories of meaning imposed upon sense perception” (p. 22).

For Max Weber, too, struggles over the symbolic realm were critical for politicians, especially charismatic leaders, in building legitimacy (Kalyvas, 2002), though he does not explicitly discuss these leaders’ efforts to consolidate symbolic authority. Or as Bourdieu writes, “Symbolic productions therefore owe their most specific properties to the social conditions of their production, and more precisely, to the position of the producer in the field of production” (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991: 139). State primacy in the symbolic field, in other words, builds government legitimacy by ensuring that all play by its imposed rules in part by “condemn[ing] the occupants of dominated positions either to silence or to shocking outspokenness” (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991: 138).

While useful, these philosophical approaches are not easily transferable into more applied scholarship. Even political scientists who accept the relevance of symbolic power currently lack a concrete framework for understanding how it is distributed both within and among states. Furthermore, this theoretical approach often packs together political, economic, cultural, and symbolic power, obscuring the prominent role of symbolic power in shaping the central/local state dynamic.

Scholars have also noted that center/local conflict is not the only arena in which symbolic power is contested.⁸ Nevertheless, the state remains the center of political life; we view the struggle between the nation-state and its constituent units as the primary terrain of conflict over symbolic power. As historian Davies (2003) puts it, “the state was, and is, a construct, a rhetorical tool; in the famous words of Radcliffe-Brown, the anthropologist, it is a ‘source of mystification’” (p. 290). In examining how the rhetorical tool is built and maintained, we hope to shed new light on an often abstract debate.

When the state effectively manages political symbols that other actors recognize as having been fairly won in political competition, it may greatly enhance its legitimacy and reinforce its capacity. Correspondingly, symbolic power cannot simply be seized and centrally managed through administrative capacity alone. Put another way, although a degree of state capacity may be necessary to win political fights over symbolic power, the two are not synonymous. Symbolic power neither perfectly corresponds to administrative capacity nor is capacity sufficient to centralize symbolic power.

Overall, states efforts’ to marshal or disperse their symbolic authority structure interactions with other social actors in a process of legitimation similar to what Carpenter (2001) calls building “coalitions of esteem.” By both controlling and effectively managing symbols, actors can earn the respect of other political players, ultimately driving their willingness to

cede more tangible forms of authority. Consequently, as our case studies will show, the relationships between symbolic centralization and more traditional measures of capacity are neither direct nor inverse. What buttresses the legitimacy of the state in one country may undermine it in another. Local context, in short, is critical.

Recognition that symbolic power plays an important role in managing state capacity is not new. Social scientists have long acknowledged that “national symbols (flags, anthems, mottos, currencies, constitutions, holidays)” can “direct public opinion, integrate citizens and motivate public action” (Cerulo, 1989: 77). To date, however, few have examined how central governments can move to concentrate or disperse this power in relation to other domestic constituent bodies. This lacuna follows a trend identified by Beetham and Lord (1998) “to reduce the many dimensions of legitimacy to a single one: to legality or procedural regularity” (p. 5). Similarly, Weatherford (1992) notes that the weakness of the traditional approach to political legitimacy “is its tendency to concentrate on formal structures and aggregate process, and its inadequate recognition of the complementary need to observe the political system’s ‘subjective’ aspects.” It is these subjective, and, we argue, symbolic aspects that matter. As Nagel (1987) notes, political legitimacy in all regimes is an attempt to “discover a way of justifying coercively imposed political and social institutions to the people who have to live under them . . . Symbols provide a justification” (p. 218). But as political scientist Rudolph (1987) puts it, “Most post-eighteenth-century social science has lost the language to convey, let alone take seriously, the ceremonial and symbolic as anything but the instrument of the efficient” (p. 742). By examining how nation-states systematically and intentionally vary their degree of symbolic concentration, we hope to connect the often abstract theoretical work on symbols with other areas of research, such as those on state capacity and legitimacy.

Measuring symbolic centralization

Understanding the relationships between symbolic power, administrative power, legitimacy, and capacity helps us to examine why states may choose the path of either symbolic centralization or decentralization. To test these notions, we created an index of symbolic centralization to more systematically examine the variation in this dimension across selected countries (see Appendix A). Creating an index of such a nuanced concept necessarily entails making arbitrary choices, but we have tried to create an index that captures some of the mechanisms at work without privileging one strand of centralization over another. Other measures, like support for national Olympic teams, could also be included, but we were aiming for a

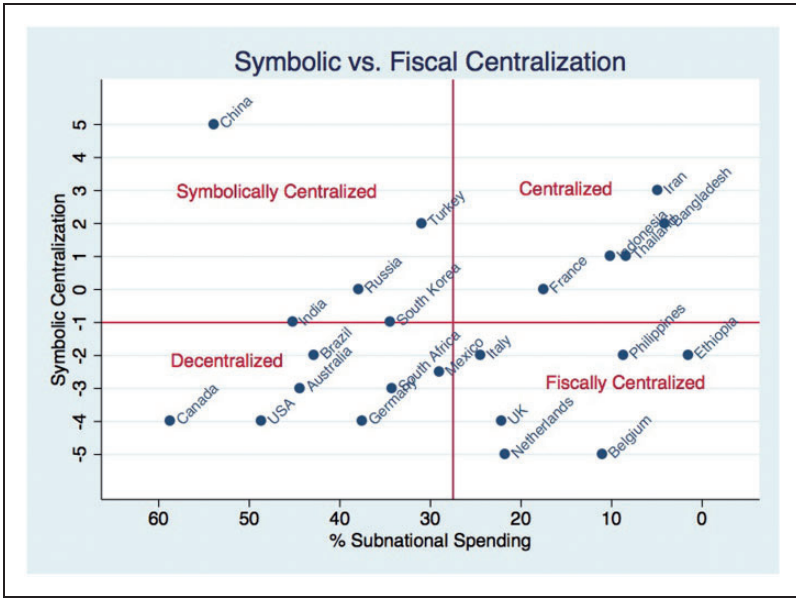


Figure 1. Symbolic versus fiscal centralization, with lines at the medians.

measure that was relatively stable through time and does not include such temporary (or cyclical) measures. It is reassuring that the index (shown in Figures 1 and 2) confirms conventional wisdom about many countries, but it also provides some counter-intuitive results. While a finding that France is quite centralized or Canada decentralized will not turn many heads, it is surprising that Indonesia or Bangladesh are highly centralized, and that Russia’s centralization is mostly symbolic, for example.

Turning further to Figure 1, which shows our index of symbolic centralization against the traditional fiscal measure, we find large variation in the way that states concentrate symbolic and fiscal resources. Although correlation does not prove causation, examining the relationship between the Symbolic Centralization Index (SCI), other measures of state centralization, and variables that have been linked to fiscal centralization provides analytic leverage about how and why nations might use symbolic power in different way.

Importantly, the SCI we have developed does not exhibit a statistically significant correlation with geographic size and is only weakly correlated with population, immediately differentiating it from previous scholarship on fiscal federalism. Removing the extreme population cases, China and India, removes any significance from the relationship with between

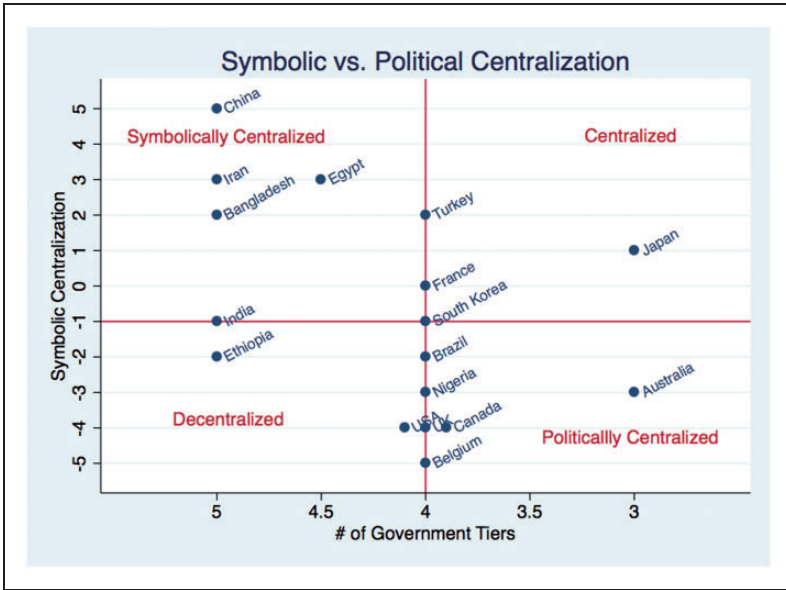


Figure 2. Symbolic versus political centralization, with lines at the medians.

symbolic centralization and national population. Symbolic centralization is also statistically independent from the percentage of government spending that occurs at the subnational level, suggesting that symbolic power can indeed be separated from fiscal measures.⁹

At the same, our SCI is strongly negatively correlated ($r = -0.578$, $p < .01$, two-tailed test) with government effectiveness, measured using the average of the World Bank’s 2005 through 2009 government effectiveness country scores. This suggests that symbolic centralization may most closely be tied to the central state’s search for legitimacy in the absence of effective capacity. In her famous “Bringing the State Back In,” Skocpol (1985) suggests that “legitimizing symbols may merely mask policies formulated to help particular interests or class fractions” (p. 15). This initial analysis suggests that state use of symbols may go further, masking gaps in state capacity or legitimacy that would otherwise be seen through purely fiscal or institutional lenses, and perhaps representing an effort of weak states to rebuild their legitimacy and administrative capacity.

Nevertheless, intriguing questions remain, both for those cases where fiscal and symbolic power align, and for those cases where they diverge. The brief statistical analysis above has suggested that low-capacity states might choose to bolster their symbolic power, but given the weak

relationship between fiscal and symbolic measures, it tells us little about why states choose particular combinations of resource provision and symbolic coercion.

We also plot the SCI against the number of governmental tiers, one common measure of political (de)centralization. These data were collected by Treisman (2002) for an unpublished paper and are available on his website. Because nearly half of all countries have exactly four governmental tiers (including the central government), this criterion is arguably not a very good measure of national centralization. Indeed, the mean, median, and mode number of national governmental levels is four, a situation that itself demonstrates the need for better, nonfiscal measures of national centralization. Figure 2 depicts the chart, with some countries removed for clarity of presentation.¹⁰

Further case studies will elaborate these lessons and show their application for a variety of topics in comparative politics including forms of state, (de)centralization, and the politics of identity and regions. After briefly introducing two cases that fit the conventional (de)centralization pattern, France (high symbolic and fiscal centralization) and Australia (low symbolic and fiscal centralization), the article concentrates on the anomalous case of China, with high symbolic and low fiscal centralization. In choosing this case, we rely on the argument of methodologist Andrew Bennett (2004), who writes that “Research of deviant cases can help inductively identify variables and hypotheses that have been left out of existing theories” (p. 38). The Chinese case helps make the argument more concrete by illustrating the mechanisms by which symbolic control bolsters Beijing’s tenuous financial control over its periphery.

Conforming cases

Even those cases that conform to the traditional models of (de)centralization often have an unexpected embedded symbolic element. Concentrating on fiscal or political (de)centralization alone elides the generally (though not invariably) deliberate choices that states make to emphasize or de-emphasize their symbolic control alongside the other mechanisms. Australia, for example, is by all measures one of the most decentralized countries in the world. In addition to a federal constitution that gives Australian states and territories wide reserve powers, the share of subnational spending invariably tops 40%, much higher than the world average of around 25% (World Bank, 2001).

Retaining independent political and fiscal power, Australian states continue to remain jealous of their symbolic power as well, illustrated in part by

their steadfast refusal to allow Canberra to create a unified national temporal regime. In state and territorial parliamentary debates, legislators are often quite forthright about maintaining the symbolic primacy of their local governments. During a 1990 debate on the contentious issue of whether Queensland should implement Daylight Saving Time (DST) to coordinate with its more populous southern neighbors, then National Party opposition MP Russell Cooper railed, "It is regrettable that the influence of southern States has taken hold. The National Party has always held out against the pressures and influences exerted by the southern States. Queensland should not have to fall into line with decisions made in the south simply to ensure that this State follows suit" (Hansard Minutes, 1990: 3809). A separate proposal to eliminate South Australia's strange 30-minute offset – one of only a handful in the world – attracted the ire of local MP Liz Penfold. She complained about South Australians "even thinking about going over to eastern standard time and just becoming an appendage to the eastern states," noting that "We should have pride in being South Australian and we really should have true central standard time" (ABC News, 2004). Despite its practicalities, the proposal ultimately failed, showing the symbolic weight of an independent time zone. Or, as a Queensland MP dryly noted, "Not much of the debate" about time zones "has been rational" (Hansard Minutes, 1990: 3813).¹¹

On the other side of the spectrum, countries that are undeniably centralized by traditional measures also take care to preserve their symbolic power. France, for example, is a unitary state that takes care to stamp out regional identities and directs more than 80% of government expenditure from Paris. French overseas territories like Guadeloupe and French Guiana, despite their distance from metropolitan France and distinct ethnic and regional identities, are considered integral parts of France and are ruled from Paris.

The symbolic power of the central French state, both domestically and internationally parallels its fiscal control over France. The French state plays an active role in what it means to be French and takes care to link the state's fiscal and symbolic power. For instance, the Toubon Law of 1994 states that schools that do not use French language instruction are ineligible for government funding. In 2010, Prime Minister François Fillon announced plans to hoist a French flag at every school in France and require students to sing the national anthem at least once a year. Another 2003 law (Loi no 2003-239, article 433-5-1) made publicly insulting the national anthem or flag punishable by a fine of €7500 and an additional fine plus six months in jail on second offense. In addition to actively promoting French national symbols, the state's symbolic power can also be seen in its consistent decision to ban other, nonnational symbols that

conflict with the authority of the secular central state. Recent examples are the French law on secularity that bans religious symbols in schools or the ban on face-covering headgear in public places. The French central government, in short, has been equally assiduous in maintaining both its symbolic and fiscal resources.

China: Central symbols, regional resources

China is an excellent example of a national government's relying strongly on symbolic resources, including its prominent adoption of "Beijing Time" as the national standard. Beijing Time is not a "natural" phenomenon and reflects a deeply politicized history. As in many countries, initial demands for a standardized time regime came from China's nascent railroad industry, with the Woosung Road Co. announcing China's first two time zones in 1876 (Huang, 2010: 28). After the overthrow of the imperial dynasty and the establishment of the nationalist KMT government in the 1910s and 1920s, China was divided into five time zones, each centered on the international standard 15 degrees of latitude (Huang, 2010: 30). Although a weak central government and a divided society ensured that many small communities continued to rely on local solar time, these five official time zones well reflected China's huge land area. During the civil war of the late 1940s, the insurgent CCP used their rival's time zone distinctions as well, but while CCP radio "used Central China Time as their standard, they called it 'Shanghai Time,' probably to distinguish them from the KMT government" (Huang, 2010: 31). As one author notes, "calling it this embodied differences in political standing," reflecting that even time itself was politicized during the conflict (Huang, 2009), though the change might have been made as a simple matter of differentiating the two sides.

Despite the apparent geographic logic of this system, though, after the 1949 revolution, China's new rulers would have none of it. Very soon "after liberation [i.e. after Oct. 1949], at the suggestion of Premier Zhou Enlai, China used the new capital,¹² Beijing's, GMT + 8 time to become the standard time for the whole country, calling it 'Beijing Time'" (Secretary, 2005). And CCP Chairman Mao Zedong was clearly aware of the powerful symbolism behind having a national time service based around the new national capital: "Soviet leader Khrushchev also suggested that China establish a time service center, but Mao Zedong... tactfully refused: 'China must have a Chinese time standard, and Chinese time cannot be in the hands of foreigners!'" he proclaimed (Party and Government Forum, 2009). This symbolism was clearly designed to emphasize China's (then aspirational) unity and the power of the central

government, a desire made especially urgent by the fact that fighting did not cease until the early 1950s and social unrest even later.

Admittedly, judging the intentions of policymakers during the very first days of the People's Republic would be difficult even with access to the relevant documents – assuming these exist. One of the few histories touching on this topic notes that the “meaning” of the abolition of Republican China's five time zones is “muddled” (mohu 模糊) (Guan et al., 2005: 136). Nonetheless, Beijing time, the book agrees, was “most probably” established by the broadcasters to impose national uniformity (Guan et al., 2005), with an official in China's bureau of standards writing that imposition of the single zone was one of the very first acts of the new People's Republic (Guo, 2003), timing strongly suggestive of political overtones. Other observers agree, finding that “The decision early in the existence of the People's Republic of China to have one time zone covering a country whose expanse previously had five time zones was clearly political and designed to enhance control” (Hamermesh et al., 2006: 7). Moreover, reshaping China's time system is not confined to recent modernity, as attested by the “complicated rituals to redefine the calendar at the beginning of each new dynasty and the countless reign names in imperial China,” writes historian Shao (2004). Qin goes on to argue that “The remaking of the concept of time often takes place after new groups come to power and involves new calendrical systems, new units of time, and new official festivals and holidays” – most of which were repeated after the CCP takeover in 1949 (Shao, 2004: 86; see also Lazar, 2014).

Even works of fiction attest to the symbolic power of the united national temporal regime. A character in a 2010 novel about three sisters growing up under Maoism wakes up to the daily announcement of Beijing time with a feeling that it is “distant, intimate, sacred, a symbol of unity, a sign that all China's citizens live planned, disciplined lives – not only the residents of Beijing, but everyone in the country” (Bi, 2010: 101). Similarly the short story “Beijing Time,” written during the Mao-era Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), has “Advance with Beijing Time!” (*genzhe Beijing shijian qianjin* 跟着北京时间前进) become the rallying cry for a group of Maoist Red Guards. “Beijing Time is the time by which Chairman Mao directs the victorious progress of the whole country!” the story's Red Guards cry (Yu, 1974: 181). During an era when censors assiduously scrutinized all literature and national entertainment options were at times limited to “eight plays, eight songs, and three film clips” (Lynch, 1999: 24), this emphasis on the importance of Beijing time well reflects the era's cultural and political zeitgeist. This emphasis continues today.

Even if China were to adopt a single time zone for convenience, Beijing, a city on the eastern coast, and far from the country's geographic center,

would hardly be the logical choice. Despite China's size, one scholar argues, "the time service must be established in the country's [political] center" even though the actual measurements are apparently taken in geographically central Shaanxi province (Lu, 2003: 40, 41). Tellingly, though, the Chinese never refer to "Shaanxi Time." The central government's control over Beijing Time continues to serve as a powerful symbolic resource, with state-sponsored journals publishing paeans like "Beijing Time," a song encouraging schoolchildren to see "Beijing Time wafting on the morning breeze to the smiling face of the nation" (Wan and Liu, 2001). These and other works may be mere propaganda that do not accurately reflect the truth behind the founding of "Beijing time," but the central government continues to promote the conflation of a unified time zone with a unified nation. Indeed, Beijing remains unyielding in the face of occasional domestic calls for a return to a more geographically sound time system, and those few dissenters have published abroad or in Hong Kong – not in mainland China.

Beyond time

The central Party/state's efforts at increasing its symbolic power do not stop at the creation and reinforcement of a single national time zone. The 1999 replacement of generic ethnic minorities on China's Renminbi (RMB), or "people's currency" with unvarying portraits of Chairman Mao, for example, are likely a result of an effort to equate the Chinese nation with the CCP, and in particular its most prominent leader. As Kaelberer (2004) argues, "money is a purposeful political tool in the construction of identities" (p. 1). A suggested teacher's exercise from the government-sponsored journal *Ideological and Theoretical Education* (*Sixiang Lilun Jiaoyu* 思想理论教育) makes clear how seriously Party scholars consider the currency a symbol of national unity. The exercise is a dialog between a teacher and students over how money should be treated, and it ends with the teacher reminding students that "safeguarding the RMB means safeguarding our national honor and ardently loving the manifestation of the Motherland" (*re'ai zuguo de biao xian* 热爱祖国的表现) (Xue, 2008: 71).¹³

Sociologist Etzioni's (1965) influential typology of power holds that this kind of symbolic power (which he terms identitive or normative power) is the most difficult to obtain but the easiest to maintain. For those Chinese who believe in China's unified national identity – and the vast majority do – symbols like a single national time zone reinforce a sense of communal identity, especially "given that the Chinese nation is derived from the state," and not the other way round (Guang, 2005: 494). And this

message is reinforced literally hourly, as seemingly every Chinese radio station announces the hour in “Beijing Time.”¹⁴

Some countries have looked longingly at China’s success in buttressing the symbolic power of the central state. Scholars at the Indian National Institute for Advanced studies, for example, have acknowledged that while there might be benefit from India’s having two time zones rather than one, such a move might increase “fissiparous” or “separatist tendencies” (Ahuja et al., 2007: 298). One of these scholars, Ahuja, has been more open about his admiration of the vast single Chinese time zone: “China insists on a single fixed time for the entire nation . . . for the sake of national unity,” he argues, and “India should stick to the same principle” (Chu, 2008: 2).

Conclusion

In this article, we have both introduced the notion of symbolic centralization and made a first attempt at quantifying it with an index measurement. We argue that control over time zones and other symbolic aspects of ordinary life can help states hold together even in the presence of strong fiscal decentralization, a phenomenon not foreseen in many current social science models. As such, we hope to direct attention to this little understood side of “everyday” politics.

Examining how nation states accumulate or cede symbolic power also has potential applications beyond a scrutiny of domestic politics. Lithuania, for example switched time zones five times throughout the 1990s and early 2000s for political reasons, moving back and forth between symbolically supporting Russia and the EU. Ultimately, Inga Pavlovaite (2003) writes, “This ‘politics of time’ was motivated by a wish to ensure that Lithuania, quite literally, live in the same time zone as a majority of Western European countries and thereby demonstrate a belonging to Europe” (p. 239). In other words, Lithuania used the symbolic politics of time to signal its commitment to support either Russia or Europe, a commitment that varied with its turbulent domestic politics in its immediate post-independence period.

Symbolic changes can also represent and shape a state’s self-conception.¹⁵ For example, long-term fighting between urban and rural interests in the US state of Indiana culminated in a 1957 state law that forbade communities – mostly larger cities – from observing DST during the winter months. State Governor Harold Handley even vowed to cut off state funding from localities attempting to disregard the law, in an apparent victory of rural state interests over the proponents of what they called “fast time,” though the law was eventually struck down (Indianapolis Star, 2005). This fight was about more than simply time, however, representing the culmination of long conflict over local self-conception of

Indiana as a primarily rural state, oriented to the Midwest, or an urban one, oriented to the East Coast.¹⁶ The politics of time in Indiana remain contentious, and after the failure of the 1957 centralization effort, the state has ceded most control back to the county level (Indianapolis Star, 2005). Ultimately, the business interests have won and the state now seems more symbolically oriented to the industrial East Coast than the agricultural Midwest.

This research agenda also raises further questions. First, what level of authority must governments achieve before they are willing to loosen their grip on symbolic control? Second, do these type of symbolic moves create either necessary or sufficient conditions for future fiscal decentralization? To borrow from Ernie Haas, is there a form of symbolic spillover that symbolic decentralization creates? Or more concretely, does our index of symbolic centralization contain the appropriate elements? How can it be improved, and can it be correlated with other political activity?

Having a more nuanced model of centralization also allows us to better theorize cases where the traditional measure, the percentage of government spending made at the subnational level, fails to accurately capture citizens' lived experiences with the central government. Previous attempts at grappling with the concept of decentralization, while valuable, have not considered the very real impact that control over symbols can have in building and maintaining state power. Political scientist Migdal (2001) has argued that "Actual states are shaped by two elements, *image* and *practices*" (p. 16, emphasis in original), and although image is hard to quantify, that does not make it a less valuable field of study – especially when image or symbols impinge daily on citizens' lives.

While China might be even more fiscally decentralized than the United States, for example, few see the People's Republic as a federal union of sovereign states. Beijing may not fully control how revenue is spent locally, but the central government still has vast power to regulate citizens' quotidian existence, down to how they structure their very days. The United Kingdom, to take a contrasting example, may be one of the most fiscally centralized countries in the world, but this does not account for its increasingly decentralized national institutions, and spending patterns will hardly convince a Scottish nationalist that government in the United Kingdom should revolve around London.

Control over time zones and other forms of symbolic centralization is designed to make state power so pervasive and basic that citizens are literally unconscious that they are being politically controlled at all. Writing about pre-Arab Spring Syria, and quoting Vaclav Havel, political scientist Wedeen (1999) writes that people in authoritarian regimes "are not required to believe the 'mystifications' the regime puts forth, and they do not, as

recent events have made clear. In normal times, they are required to act *as if* they did, and by so acting to ‘live within the lie.’ They thus ‘confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system” (p. 76, emphasis in original). By acting as if they live by Beijing time, for example, Tibetans reinforce the control of a distant capital many dislike, a sharp contrast to many Uyghurs in far-West Xinjiang province, who resist Beijing’s authority by living on an unofficial “Xinjiang Time” that places them two hours behind their Han Chinese neighbors (Bovingdon, 2002: 58). Similarly, it is hardly coincidental that the Russian government’s move to reduce time zones in its far East comes in the wake of other centralizing reforms designed to reduce regional autonomy. Few measures achieve this goal more fundamentally than control over the clock – and it is time for social scientists to pay attention.

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Notes

1. Calculations from 1998 data (latest year available). By comparison, the United States ranks only 1.77 standard deviations above the international mean.
2. Local misappropriation of budgets is a huge problem that seems to be best controlled not by Beijing, which has relatively powerless oversight, but by local communities themselves. See Tsai (2007).
3. In part, this situation arises because of the central government’s poor information about problems in the periphery. Strict local (and national) media control, a lack of accountability procedures, and a sprawling bureaucracy all combine to ensure that Beijing is often left in the dark about the actions and spending of predatory local officials. See Landry (2008) for more.
4. Of course, the people and organizations in a society may not think of time the same way the state does, leading to potential friction. See Bluedorn (2002), especially, Ch. 4 for more on social conventions and temporal friction around the world.
5. As when the 1992 Yugoslav Dinar, featuring mainly generic people and emphasizing a pan-Yugoslav identity, was replaced just a year later with notes featuring Serbian nationalist figures, poets, and heroes – and just a single Montenegrin – despite the fact the country was a loose federation between Serbia and Montenegro. Kosovars, significantly, were not represented at all.
6. The proposal is available at http://www.worldtimezone.com/dst_news/dst_news_brazil05.html, and local objections from the state of Acre from <http://www.noticiasahora.com/acre/4184-acreanos-decidem-voltar-ao-horario->

- For Brazil's earlier decentralizing efforts, see Falleti (2010). Falleti argues against recent claims that Brazil is recentralizing (pp. 186–187), though the time zone proposal is further evidence that Brasilia is interested in doing so.
7. Large N work on the relationship between country size and fiscal centralization, for instance, Panizza (1999) has found a negative relationship between size and fiscal centralization. Other analyses, such as Alesina (2003), have equated size with more general definitions of decentralization, but we find little initial evidence that size is similarly negatively related to symbolic centralization. More large N work is needed examining both the way that size relates to symbolic centralization and the way in which symbolic and fiscal measures co-vary before scholars should make assumptions about the links between size and symbols.
 8. For instance, Girling (2004) describes the conflict over symbolic authority in France as a struggle between elites and masses.
 9. For size $r = .014$, $p < .95$ (all p -values calculated using two-tailed tests). For population $r = .348$, $p < .070$. Removing the extreme Chinese and Indian cases $r = .131$, $p < .523$. For subnational expenditure $r = -.161$, $p < .463$
 10. Note also that the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada all score exactly the same on this rubric, so for ease of presentation we have separated them slightly on the chart.
 11. Much of the debate concentrates on more mundane issues like worries over Australian schoolchildren being forced to wait for school buses in the dark, but the symbolic element is clearly in play as well.
 12. The previous regime used the south-central city of Nanjing as the capital, and the switch to Beijing represented a symbolic break with the previous Nationalist government.
 13. This concern with symbolic authority is not confined to contemporary China. Historian Robert Somers has argued that during the Tang Dynasty (CE 618–907), often considered to the peak of classical Chinese civilization, the central state buttressed its claims to preeminence mainly through symbolic, rather than coercive means (Somers, 1986: 973).
 14. This formula does not appear to vary locally, at least among the 20-odd provinces Hassid has visited.
 15. In 2004, for example, the Russian central government moved that all local regional governors be appointed, rather than elected. See Baker (2004).
 16. Rural legislators, for example, objected to daylight saving time on the grounds that it would be “unhealthy for cows,” and “unnatural” (Indianapolis Star, 2005). 2005 legislation to allow some counties to switch from Eastern to Central time, for example, was overwhelmingly opposed by Democrats (representing urban areas), but narrowly passed on Republican (rural) support (Smith, 2006).

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Appendix A: Conceptualizing and measuring symbolic centralization

Methodologically, any measure of symbolic control falls under the larger rubric of state power. Following the approach of Collier and Levitsky (1997), our measure attempts to move down the ladder of generality, providing conceptual innovation through differentiation. A useful conceptualization of symbolic control, therefore, must be distinct from fiscal control or formal institutional power. Consequently, symbolic control is not conceptualization through the rules per se, but as actions that control the perceptions of citizens over the sources of legitimate political action. This control increases with the recognition that the central state has the power to define social and cultural relationships, even those that run counter to the wishes of the constituent regions. Symbolic control decreases as other actors are seen as the legitimate arbiters of political life.

We grant that this concept is inherently difficult to measure, especially because we cannot simply read it from formal institutions. We argue it is tied most closely into political legitimacy – how contested is the central state’s ability to control symbols for national purposes. Rothschild (1977) takes this track, arguing that governments legitimate their central control through symbols. Building on Aristotle, he argues that states elicit compliance – gaining political power or capacity – in ways that go beyond simply the use of force, the distribution of rewards, or by education. They also create compliance through symbolic means. Recent work in political science has explored similar mechanisms. For instance, Carpenter’s work on bureaucracies explores the “coalitions of esteem” that build confidence in policy-making and popular support for institutional authority over quotidian life.

For Seymour Lipset, symbols are a necessary key to legitimacy. Lipset (1959: 90, *emphasis added*) argues that:

“Nations like the United States, Sweden, and Britain satisfy the basic political needs of their citizens, have efficient bureaucracies and political decision-making systems, possess traditional legitimacy *through long-term continuity of the key symbols of sovereignty*, the monarchy or constitution, and do not contain any important minorities whose basic values run counter to those of the system.”

Similarly, Stepan (1978) argues that “The State must be considered as more than the ‘government.’ It is the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems that attempt to not only structure relationships *between* civil society and public authority in a polity but also to structure many crucial relationships within civil society as well.”

Our approach aims to systematize these formulations, which are contested between actors and levels of governments. Symbols are one weapon political winners may use to legitimate their control and reinforce state capacity. If terms of effects, therefore, they makes the state the center of political life and public debate (even if that is not the case fiscally).

Edelman’s (1960) work on symbolic reassurance shows the diversity of settings in which symbolic power might be applied. Writing about businesses negotiations within regulatory systems Edelman writes that “Emotional commitment to a symbol is associated with contentment and quiescence regarding problems that would otherwise arouse concern.” Similarly, national or regional symbols may be used to align interest groups into political constituencies. In many ways, what Edelman describes mirrors formal work on beliefs in Bayesian analysis. With incomplete information, political actors use symbols in an attempt to shift beliefs about the capacity and legitimacy of the central (or regional) state to handle political demands.

More specifically, therefore, symbols:

1. Build national interest groups through emotional commitment
 - Create national identities and national constituencies
2. Focus political attention on the political actor exercising symbolic control
 - Increase legitimacy and perceived capacity
3. Create continuity on the key symbols of sovereignty
 - Through flags, currency, borders, etc.
4. Manipulate the objective structure of society
 - Create cultural divisions, linguistic groups, etc.

Symbolic power, however, is not solely the purview of the central state. It can be used either to assert and preserve control or to increase regional autonomy (perhaps as Skocpol (1985: 15), suggests in order to “mask policies formulated to help particular interests or class fractions.”)

Given these thoughts, our index measuring symbolic centralization emphasizes both a positive (or active central control) dimension and a negative (or regional) control dimension. Each of the six components of positive centralization are score 0 (no state control) or 1 (state control) while the six negative decentralization components are score 0 (no regional control) or -1 (regional control).

Positive dimension (Central state assertion of power)

1. Central state controls setting of time zones and borders
2. Central state controls time zones in a manner inconsistent with geography/against the will of local populations
3. Legal provisions prohibiting defacing national flag or other national symbols
4. Controls of specific cultural/religious practices (regional dress, cuisine, religious symbols, etc.)
5. Legal provisions banning/controlling regional symbols
6. Official national religion (or official state religious policy, such as atheism)

Negative dimension (Regional assertion of power)

1. Independent regional government (with or without fiscal powers)
2. Regional units set different linguistic standards
3. Subnational authority to set public holidays
4. Regional/noncentral currency issue
5. Subnational anthems
6. Multiple national capitals

Twenty-eight countries, totaling approximately 75% of the world's population, were scored using this method, with scores ranging from 5 (China, the most symbolically centralized country studied) to -5 (Belgium and the Netherlands). The full scores were as follows:

Country	Score
China	5
Egypt (pre-Arab Spring)	3
Iran	3
Bangladesh	2
Turkey	2
Indonesia	1
Japan	1
Vietnam	1
Thailand	1

(continued)

Continued

Country	Score
Dem. Rep. of the Congo	1
France	0
Russia	0
India	-1
South Korea	-1
Brazil	-2
Philippines	-2
Ethiopia	-2
Italy	-2
Mexico	-2.5
Australia	-3
Nigeria	-3
South Africa	-3
Canada	-4
Germany	-4
UK	-4
USA	-4
Belgium	-5
Netherlands	-5
