

*Perceptual Divided Leviathan and the Modes of Political Participation in China**

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Abstract

How do Chinese citizens strategize their political participation in the decentralized authoritarian regime? Going beyond the conventional focus on the volume of overall or a specific type of participation, this article focuses on citizens' varying degrees of participation across a range of political activities. It considers the perceived Chinese divided leviathan as a crucial cognitive shortcut for ordinary citizens to assess the uncertain activism environment, estimate the relative costs and benefits of different political activities, and strategize their participation portfolios. Using nationally representative survey data, the article exploits latent class analysis to uncover four distinct mass participatory modes—outsiders, conventionals, agitators, and activists—and examines the impact of perceptual government trustworthiness and integrity on modal transition. The empirical results reveal that citizens' perceptions of a division between the central and local government affect their choice of participatory activities but not their overall participation

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levels: people who perceive a greater integrity division tend to engage the state in an agitative and contentious mode, and are less likely to do so in an institutionalized, conventional mode. By detecting latent participatory modes and one important underlying psychological rationale, the article contributes to understanding political participation and state-society relations in China.

In Feng Xiaogang's 2016 movie *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (我不是潘金莲 *wo bushi panjinlian*), a Chinese woman, Li Xuelian, seeks redress after her husband swindles her. Turned away by local authorities, she escalates her efforts through dramatized resistance performances including demonstrating and sitting-in, climbing each bureaucratic step of the Chinese political system. Zhang Yimou's 1992 movie, *The Story of Qiu Ju* (秋菊打官司 *qiuju da guansi*), told a similar tale. These stories highlight the political psychology of aggrieved Chinese citizens and their activism, which remain strong in present-day Chinese society.

Both films distinguish between the central and local government, reflecting a tendency among Chinese citizens to disaggregate the state, placing high levels of trust in the central government but much lower levels of trust in local governments. Research shows Chinese citizens see central officials as often benign figures but local officials as predatory and corrupt, a pattern of hierarchical political trust in contrast to that in other regimes.¹ Relatedly, their engagement with the state also displays some distinct features. For instance, some research finds that Chinese people with grievances are extremely enthusiastic about petitioning higher-level authorities even though they probably receive no redress and risk extralegal detention and economic cost.² Protestors in China employ a variety of "troublemaking" tactics such as sit-ins, blocking traffic, and destroying government property,³ in spite of the risk of legal punishment and state repression. In a context where political fear and uncertainty is high, it seems surprising that agitative participation has become routine. Recent game-theoretic literature suggests that the decentralized authoritarian regime may design contentions for various informational benefits, pointing to a supply-side story.⁴ What on the ground drives individual citizens' varied participation, however, remains unclear. A rational citizen must *perceive* the activism opportunity embedded in the regime for it to take effect.

This article revisits the "state-focused" political psychology culminating in hierarchical political perceptions to explain the modes of mass