An Exercise for the People’s Republic:
Order and Discipline in the Morning Ritual of a Chinese Primary School

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Abstract

This paper examines the exercise of state control (and failure thereof) through institutionalized enforcement of the radio gymnastic exercise at a primary school in rural China. Based on ethnographic data collected from observation and interviews, I analyze how the exercise ritual sponsors the socialization of disciplined and responsible Chinese nationals. I argue that the subjectivation mechanism operates at the dimension of ritual form and practice. Suggesting a shift of the analytical point of departure from meaning and ideology to form and context, I hope to illustrate how practice theory and ritual studies can enhance our understanding of the state and its subjectivation instruments.

This paper analyzes the discursive construction of the “ritual subjunctive” (Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon 2008) in which children participate in the radio-gymnastic exercise as if they are healthy, disciplined, and collective-minded individuals in the modern Chinese nation. Underneath the expressive narratives of “training your body for your own good,” however, is a subjectivation mechanism that operates primarily with repetitions and the performative. It is the repeated bodily movement and ritualistic enactment of the exercise that inculcate participants with a state-induced body culture. Ritual practice, which is by nature ambiguous and indeterminate, opens up the space for recreating social order. On the one hand, ritual allows the public display of power and the reaffirmation of hierarchy. On the other hand, unintended failures and purposeful resistance could undermine the ritual order and give rise to potentials of social change. I hope that this study would contribute to the scholarly understanding of the politicized body and its relationship to the state.
Radio gymnastic exercise (Guangbo Ticao 广播体操) is part of the school curriculum in most primary (age 6-11) and secondary (age 12-17) schools in China. Every morning at 6:10am, students at Shuiping Primary School are required to assemble at the school courtyard for morning exercise, the routine that kicks off the new school day. The exercise begins with the cursory inspection of required school attires and line-up formation performed by the teachers-on-duty. After the brief formality, music bursts out from the school’s central announcement system. Upon hearing the music, all children stop the chatters and start to move their bodies with the rhythm. With daily practice, the children’s movements have become quite well-coordinated. The music and the moves are all centrally designed by the Bureau of Education to be observed by all primary schools throughout China. The exercise sequence, which comprises of simple movements such as skipping and raising ones’ hands, lasts for approximately six minutes. Usually, the exercise is followed by lap running. Children are commanded to run around the courtyard for three times. After that comes the last part of the morning ritual. At the top of their voice, all children shout in uniform: “Be persistent in training! Strengthen our bodies! Study diligently! Serve our motherland!” The teachers-on-duty dismiss the children after the collective pronouncement of the school motto.

Any anthropologist would immediately notice the nationalistic motifs underpinning the morning exercise. From the center place of the Chinese national flag in the courtyard to the
required attires of wearing the little red scarves (the symbol of Communist Youth League membership), from the state-engineered nature of the exercise to its nationally synchronized movement, from the heavily patriotic lyrics of the accompanying music (see Appendix 1) to the proclamation of “serve our motherland” at the end of the ritual— all such details invite a nationalistic interpretation to the nature and function of the routine exercise. Surprisingly, whenever I inquire teachers and students at Shuiping about the nationalistic elements in the exercise, my faintest reference to the state would be immediately dismissed. Everybody believes (or at least, appears to believe) that the radio gymnastic exercise is in place for the children’s own good – one needs a strong body and a strong mind to handle academic pressure and tough challenges in life. Intrigued by the curious absence and denial of nationalistic discourse, I start to question the function and significance of the morning exercise. Am I over-analyzing the exercise with a nationalistic interpretation? Is its mandated implementation solely for health and educational purposes? In what ways is the morning exercise an instrument for subject making and social control?

Using ethnographic data collected at a primary school in rural China, this paper examines the exercise of state power (and failure thereof) through institutionalized enforcement of the radio gymnastic exercise. A theoretical ambition of this paper is to illuminate the nature and operation of the totalitarian state. Elaborating upon Foucault’s model on the state and its disciplinary power, I seek a deeper understanding of the subjectivation mechanism at work. The daily repetitions of bodily movement, the collective effervescence promoted in the exercise, the structure with which it frames the school schedule, and the context of which the exercise takes place all contribute to the training of disciplined and cooperative Chinese nationals. Subjectivation is always at a state of ambivalence and imperfection. The process is never free of
struggle, resistance, and failure. At this process of “becoming,” it is not belief and ideology, but bodily practices and ritual forms that constitute the most durable and efficient instrument to subject making. Suggesting a shift in analytical emphasis from meaning to practice, I hope that this paper would contribute to the scholarly understanding of the politicization of the body and its relationship to state control.

**Data and Methodology**

This paper is based on ethnographic data collected in June 2009 when I was in residence at *Shuiping Primary School* with a volunteering group. Materials referenced were collected primarily during the sixteen observation sessions in the morning exercise. The analysis is complemented by eight semi-structured individual and group interviews conducted with two school administrators (the school principle and the vice principle), two teachers, and nine students (six girls and three boys in the forth and the fifth grades). Information is also drawn from informal conversations and interactions with students and teachers. I have also consulted newspaper articles and transcripts of official statements available online for understanding the history and background information of the exercise.

*Shuiping Primary School* is situated in a rural township of about 25,000 people in South China. The school has about 60 teachers and 1,000 students (aged four to eleven). Children are divided into seventeen classes of about sixty each. There is a boarding requirement for all students of grades four and five, that all children in the age range of nine to eleven are required to live in school dormitories from Mondays to Fridays. While the entire student body is required to assemble at the courtyard for the radio gymnastic exercise at 10am, boarding students do one extra section at 6:10am before classes start. Their schedule is filled with classes and self-studied

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3 Information taken from the school’s information leaflet. During my field work, there were only about 30 teachers who were regularly on campus.
sections from 6am to 8:30pm, with breakfast, lunch, dinner, and afternoon breaks that add up to about four hours (See appendix 2). Because of their doubled exercise time and my more frequent interactions with them, boarding students of grades four and five are my major informants.

**Body Culture and Political Control**

In her studies of sports and nationalism in China, Susan Brownell offers a detailed portrayal on how athletic trainings and sporting events are related to the political schema of the Communist regime (2008 and 1995). Having been a member of a college sports team in the People’s Republic herself, Brownell recounts how the athletes’ bodies are made into “objects in the service of the people” (1995:7) through repeated bodily movements and exposures to public spectatorship. Athletes are constantly reminded to train their bodies for the glory of the nation. Believing in “practice makes permanent” (1995:13), Brownell views exercises and sporting events as essential elements in building the moral order of China. Repeated bodily practices induce a nationalistic “body culture,” which she defines as “the entire repertoire of things that people do to, and with, their bodies and the elements of culture that give meaning to their actions” (2008:49-50). The body is a microcosm of which state, class, gender, and moral ideologies are manifested. Throughout the history of the People’s Republic, discourse surrounding the body is channeled to serve state policies and its attempted monopoly over the definitions of modernity and civilization.

Brownell’s work draws heavily from Pierre Bourdieu, who proposes the concept of “habitus” in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Bourdieu defines “habitus” as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (1977:72). They are imposing and self-sustaining niches of (class-related) beliefs and practices that conform individuals through socialization. The social
values that individuals acquire from the “structuring structures” are largely inexplicit and unconscious. “Schemas are able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness” (1977:78). Practices, always socially informed and reproduced, are the origins, products, and manifestations of social values and dispositions. The duality between the self and the social is dissolved and merged into a single site of social process and reproduction. The implications of Bourdieu’s habitus are sometimes criticized for being too socially deterministic. Equating individual practices with social dispositions negates the place of agency and individuals’ variations in thoughts and behaviors. The assumed dorminance of social imperatives downplays the frictions and tensions during the socialization process.

An analysis of the relationship between ritual practice and state control, this paper is particularly interested in the embodiment of political discipline and social order. The idea of internalized political control is most famously proposed and propagated by Michel Foucault (1995), whose study of the panopticon illustrates how order and discipline are reflexively and internally enforced. The state does not operate as a legalistic force external to the society and the individual. Instead, its power is generated, manifested, and maintained through subjectivation – the internalization of political order through the meticulous organization of space, sequences, and movement. Elaborating upon the Foucaultian framework, Timothy Mitchell argues that the state “should be examined not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist” (1991:94). The state is nowhere but everywhere, because it exists (solely) in the imagination of the individual. It is the individual’s perceptions of state power that matters.

This paper re-examines Foucault’s model using the empirical case of the exercise ritual. Bringing together Bourdieu’s practice theory and Foucault’s panopticon gaze, I hope to elaborate
on the process of how political control and discipline are inculcated through ritual practice and body culture. Drawing from the recent work of Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, Michael Puett, and Bennett Simon (2008), I attempt to highlight the importance of repetitions and the performative in ritual analysis. Routine practices are performative reenactment of social norms and power relationships. Whereas meanings can easily become mundane and ineffectual with repetitions, practice is a much more durable instrument to channel habits and dispositions. Ritual studies, therefore, have to move beyond structural functionalism, symbolic interpretation, and discursive analysis. I believe that insights can be generated by turning to ritual form and context (versus sincere beliefs and ideology) as the analytical point of departure.

**Radio Gymnastic Exercise in the People’s Republic**

Physical education (tiyu 体育) is an endeavor for cultural education as well as for hygiene and health. The promotion of physical education is high on the agenda of the central government… Physical education in the past tended to be elitist and detached from the general public. The present enterprise of physical education, on the other hand, has to be oriented towards serving the people (wei renmin fuwu 为人民服务).

- Zhu De, Commander in Chief of the People’s Liberation Army (1949, c.f. Beijing Daily 2009)

Radio gymnastic exercise in China has almost as old a history as the People’s Republic itself. Its prototype came from Japan, where it was first nationally promoted in 1928. Radio gymnastic exercise, or literally “broadcasting exercise,” acquires its name because the music with which the exercise accompanies is broadcasted through the radio. Centrally coordinated and broadcasted nationally, the idea of the exercise was to enable Japanese nationals across the country to exercise together at the same time. The short exercise, usually five to six minutes long, is comprised of such simple moves as arm raising and leg stretching motions. The exercise tends to be short and easy for people to follow, and thus allows nation-wide participation by all nationals regardless of age, gender, and physical fitness.
The first set of radio gymnastic exercise in China was announced on November 24, 1951. The idea was inspired when twelve Chinese representatives were invited to visit the sports facilities in the Soviet Union in August 1950. The socialist “physical culture,” as the representatives learned, should engage the proletariat public as much as possible in order to attack the elitist European conception of culture which induced only the fine arts (Brownell 1995:19, c.f. Eichberg 1977). Yang Lie, the only female member in the visiting group, was impressed by the Soviet state effort in promoting physical exercises among the general public. Upon her return to China, Yang wrote a proposal to recommend the state creation of a popular exercise. Her idea was favorably received. The first radio gymnastic exercise was put together within a year of her initial recommendation.

Since 1951, the Chinese government has altogether announced eight sets of radio gymnastic exercise for adults. Three sets of exercises have been especially designed for primary and secondary school students. The latest (third) set of four exercises was announced in July 2008, not coincidently before the summer of the Beijing Olympic Games. The exercise set implemented at Shuiping Primary School is called Qicai Yangguang (“Colorful Sunshine,” 七彩阳光). Approximately six minutes long, the exercise set features a lot of skipping and hopping motions. My student interviewees described it as being “physically exhausting but quite fun.”

In the following paragraphs, I analyze how the radio-gymnastic exercise is represented in media coverage and official announcements. Interestingly, the thematic tropes mobilized in the official discourse largely overlap with those frequently adopted by my informants at Shuiping. The tropes of “science and physical health,” “persistence and self-discipline,” and “collective conscience” are often referenced to when teachers and students talk about the exercise. The ritual offers a space for various stakeholders, including the state and its citizens, to engage in the
imagination of an ideal society in which all citizens are healthy, disciplined, and responsible. Justifying the daily routine with the goal of self-cultivation, these discursive tropes define the nature and the meaning of the exercise.

Science and Physical Health

At the press conference when the Ministry of Education announced the “Third Set of National Radio Gymnastic Exercise for Secondary and Primary School Students” (第三套全国中小学生广播体操) on July 11, 2008, state representatives often make reference to “scientific research.” According to the spokespeople, the design of the choreography is based on “scientific strategies for bodily training,” with its theoretical foundations grounded in “pedagogy, psychology, physiology, sociology, and kinetic biology” (CENO 2008). It has been “scientifically tested” that students’ oxygen intake and heart rate increases by over 40% when doing the aerobic exercise (CENO 2008). Researchers have also elicited feedbacks from “psychological and sociological surveys” after test-running the exercise sequence at several schools in Beijing. Participants have generally responded favorably that the exercise is of an appropriate level of difficulty, and that the choreography is aesthetically pleasing.

The use of scientific vocabulary sponsors a “scientifically proven” casual relationship between the radio gymnastic exercise and a healthy body. The authoritative discourse, allegedly endorsed by the scientific community, has been adopted by school administrators and students to understand and justify the implementation of the exercise. The school principle at Shuiping told me that the school was happy to administer the morning exercise because it is “scientifically tested to be beneficial to children’s health and bodily development.” When inquired about why they participate in the radio gymnastic exercise, all students that I interviewed responded immediately that the exercise is “good for the body.” Everybody presented me with the
impression that one does the exercise out of one’s free will and determination to improve his/her physical strength and health. As Foucault elaborates in his model of “the micro-physics of power,” “power always determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge” (1977:28).

The state discourse has been adopted and normalized in the popular understanding of the exercise. The school as an educational institution facilitates and reinforces the diffusion of the scientific discourse from the central state apparatus all the way down to individual participants. It is an example of how knowledge and civilization radiate from the exemplary center of Beijing through the cooperation and mediation of intermediary hierarchy and institutions. The nationwide promotion of an exercise ritual enables the civilizing discourse to permeate through the “less civilized” regions and populations.

It is probably not a coincidence that a new set of exercise was announced at the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics Game. Reinvigorating popular discussions on the radio gymnastic exercise was part of the schema to engage all Chinese nationals into the conversations of exercise and health. The emphasis on “science” and “research” demonstrates the aspiration and the need to rationality and modernity in justifying educational policies. Regardless of the state’s true motive in instigating the exercise rituals, the discourse reflects that the global language of scientific rationality and modernity has become an important component in the official and popular understanding of civilization.

*Persistence and Self-Discipline*

Teachers at *Shuiping* believe that discipline is instrumental for the science of exercise and health to work. When I inquired about the purpose of the morning exercise, all school teachers and administrators immediately responded with the explanation that “we want the children to be persistence in training (their body) (*jianchi duannian* 堅持鍛鍊),” or that “the habit of exercise is
good for the children.” Exercise is only beneficial if one keeps up with a routine practice. The teachers said that they want to train not only the children’s bodies but also their minds. A product of “persistence training,” a “tough and strong mind” is essential for children to get through the hurdles in life. Persistence and determination are noble virtues that will be of use to the children for their entire life.

Children’s motivations for exercising are closely scrutinized. It is repeatedly reinforced that doing exercise is a fun and healthy habit, and that children should train themselves into practicing and enjoying the routine “for their own good.” While the routine practice of the radio gymnastic exercise is imposed by the state and the school, it is believed that the repetition will eventually induce the habit of daily exercise even without supervision. A teacher told me, “we want the children to keep exercising on their own initiatives. It is a good training for their will-power.” It is important for the children to be sincerely happy and voluntary in practicing the bodily moves.

The vice principle’s pre-exercise routine is a good illustration of the emphasis on free will and self-discipline. While teachers take turn to supervise the exercise routine, the vice principle is exempted from participation. Nevertheless, he is often among the earliest to arrive at the courtyard every morning. A few minutes before the students’ exercise ritual, he starts jogging around the courtyard as a self-imposed routine. He always invites children to join him. Usually a couple of children would jog with him under his repeated invitation and encouragement. The vice principle often praises these students for their sincerity in and devotion to exercising. His deliberate gesture to parade his own efforts reveals the importance of free will in exercising. Voluntary and self-disciplined exercising habits are particularly commendable.
Discipline instigated during the radio gymnastic exercise is applicable not only to the persisting habits of exercising, but also to the ability to organize one’s daily schedule. A teacher discussed the significance of the exercise with me not in terms of bodily benefits but the organizational structure that it imposes on children’s time table. He said, “the school needs discipline and a time table… A regular schedule is useful for teachers and students alike. Regularity in practice allows the students to adjust their moods and emotions… students thus learn when they have to pay attention and when they can relax and play.” The vice principle of the school also told me that starting the day with the exercise routine helps the children to tune themselves to an energetic start of the morning: “they will get invigorated for the rest of the day.”

The exercise ritual, which creates a framework with which participants can organize their daily routine, is believed to be a practice for self-discipline. As one teacher puts it, the exercise “teaches children how to follow and to obey rules.” It is to inculcate the habits of persistence and discipline, some of the most important qualities of an ideal Chinese national.

**Collective Consciousness**

The lively melody and the bouncy bodily moves bring us back to that familiar world in the past. Everybody in the audience today grew up with the radio gymnastic exercise. The exercise trained our body and also our mind. It was part of our daily life. It is part of our childhood memories from growing up.

- The master of ceremony’s introduction to the July 11, 2008 press conference on the new set of radio gymnastic exercise (CENO 2008)

There is a certain sense of nostalgia evoked when I talked about the exercise ritual with the teachers. Anyone who has been through the Chinese schooling system over the last few decades would not be unfamiliar with the exercise routine. A teacher told me that she saw herself in the children when she taught her students the moves. As it has been reiterated at the press conference, radio gymnastic exercise is a collective memory shared by people of the same generation. Although some children do not know that the exercise is promoted nation-wide, all
of them seem to be aware that students at some other schools are practicing the same ritual every day. A student told me that she sometimes exercises at home with her sister who goes to a different primary school. A teammate of mine, a 19-year-old girl born and raised in mainland China, told me that she was pleasantly surprised to find out that “the exercise is the same” when she had to transfer when her family relocated from Tianjin to Nanjing. She said, “I enjoy finding the feeling of warmth and familiarity (qinqei gan) even when one moves across the country.” Using the terms of Benedict Anderson, the radio gymnastic exercise sponsors a “collective ritual” that promotes “a consciousness of connectedness” (2006[1983]:56) of the nation as an “imagined community.” The shared experience of participation reminds a school child in the most remote village that there are unbeknownst and yet somehow related individuals beyond his or her immediate social circle.

The exercise ritual also serves to reinforce participants’ group identity at multiple nested levels. The stringent demands on group formation and synchronized movements require children to be aware of the pace and the rhythm of the collective in order to readjust their bodily motions accordingly. While the goal of strengthening the body is individualistic and self-oriented, “successful” performance of the ritual is highly dependent on the cooperation of the collective. The exercise also fosters the sense of group belonging. In inter-class or inter-school competitions, to perfect the moves become a quest for glory. The discourse of glory and competition echoes Brownell’s ethnography, in which she describes how athletes are constantly reminded of their mission to “win glory for Beijing.” Official discourse is not evasive about the agonistic aspect of the exercise: “The radio gymnastic exercise is an indicator of school performance. It “reflects a school’s achievement in students’ spiritual health, administrative efficiency, and student-teacher relationship” (CENO 2008). The school principle was always
proud to tell me that Shuiping came second in the regional competition for the best exercise performance. During the June 1 celebration for the Children’s Day, the entire morning was dedicated to an inter-class competition of exercise performance. Teachers were the judges to the competition while all parents were invited to be spectators. Both the competitive and collaborative elements in the exercise help cultivating collective consciousness among school children. Participants are reminded of their membership in different nested groups as well as in the Chinese nation.

While the radio gymnastic exercise does not usually constitute the topic of everyday conversations, informants tend to relate immediately to certain thematic tropes once related discourse is evoked. Embodied in the exercise ritual are qualities of scientific rationalism, modernity, health, discipline, and collective awareness that constitute an ideal Chinese citizen (or subject). The ritual sponsors an image of ideal citizenship to which the state and the people aspire. Ann Anagnost calls this socialist realism: “the representation of society as it is desired to be, rather than as it really is, becomes a means to magically affect one’s sense of reality” (1994:147). The discursive description comes to define and construct a social reality.

This social world sui generis – what Seligman et.al. (2008) refer to as the ritual subjunctive – is the subjunctive reality embodying the social ideals in their purest forms. Every morning, teachers and students engage in the exercise and perform the routine “as if” they were all good citizens of the state.

An analytical emphasis on the discursive construction of a social subjunctive alone, however, is not enough to explain the role of the exercise ritual in civic education. The ritual is the embodied ideal and the embodiment process in one. Performative and ritualistic in nature, the morning routine allows the daily reconstruction, transmission, and reenactment of social
ideals. Since it is an ongoing process that can never reach its perfections, simply reading symbolic meanings off its ideal realization is insufficient to capture its dynamics and complexities. Drawing from the work of Seligman et.al. (2008), I argue for a shift in the analytical point of departure from ritual *meaning* to ritual *practice*. The sincere search for meaning in the social subjunctive is inevitably diluted with mundane repetition. Symbols and discourses evoked by the exercise are not likely to have a long-lasting efficacy in transforming participants into ideal subjects. Ritual work functions more significantly through the imprint of habits and body culture. With reference to my empirical example, I attempt to show that the state mechanism and its ritual instrument work the most effectively at the performative site of repeated practice.

**From Meaning to Practice: On the Ambiguities of Nationalism**

Nationalism assumes an ambiguous presence in the exercise ritual. A discerning reader might have noticed the absence of patriotic and nationalistic elements in our discussion on discursive tropes above. While the ideals of collectivism and shared memories are addressed, there is no overt reference to the nation or the state. All of my informants are evasive about connecting the exercise to national identity. While the ritual reeks of a nationalistic flavor for an outside observer like myself, the trace of civic education is nowhere to be found in people’s testimonies. Such omission is perhaps counter-intuitive, for we tend to associate civic education cross-culturally with the indoctrinations of nationalistic beliefs. It is important to locate the socializing mechanism if we are to understand the nation-building elements behind the nationwide implementation of the exercise.

Nationalistic symbols are by no means absent in the exercise ritual. The ritual is always conducted in front of a Chinese national flag. The music accompanying the exercise features
lyrics that make explicit reference to the Chinese nation, and reinforce the notion that participants should strengthen the body in order to “work hard for the prosperity of our nation” (see Appendix 1). The end of the ritual is always marked by the collective pronouncement of the slogan “serve our motherland.” Every Monday, the 10am time slot for radio gymnastic exercise is replaced by the more overtly nationalistic exercise of a flag raising ceremony. Symbols and ideas related to the nation permeate through the setting and the sequence of the exercise ritual.

What seem to be missing are not symbols but discourse of nationalism. Only one of the nine children whom I formally interviewed mentioned “having a strong body is important for serving the motherland,” not to mention that the statement was only the result after much deliberate prompting. During my forty-five-minute-long interview with the school principle, my slightest reference to nationalism is always immediately denied, followed by his repeated reassurance that “the exercise is observed for the children’s own good (and their own good alone).” When I inquired why the school chooses to close the exercise ritual with the slogan “serve the motherland,” the school principle denies any significance to the content of the line. He said, “it (the slogan) could be anything, even counting numbers would do. We just want to give the children an opportunity to let the air out of their lungs. Shouting is good for air circulation.” Two students gave me the same rationale when asked about the slogan. Discourse of nationalism is not only deliberately avoided, but also decidedly denied upon the most explicit inquisition.

Foucault would have interpreted the absence of nationalist discourse as indicative of successful totalitarian control. The panoptic gaze becomes instinctual to participants that no one even realizes the invisible operation of subjectivation at the subconscious level. An alternative explanation at the other end of the spectrum could read the denial of nationalistic discourse as an
act of resistance. The Chinese socialist state exerts its power through making itself visible (Anagnost 1994). People’s refusal to acknowledge the nationalistic indoctrination proclaims the failure of the state in asserting its omnipresence. Avoidance of nationalistic discourse rejects the state from their everyday life. I find neither the hegemonic model nor the resistance model satisfying in explaining my informants’ perceptions of the state and its mandated exercise. Participants in the radio gymnastic exercise are not necessarily victims of false consciousness or proactively resisting agents. They are not totally unquestioning subjects, nor are they intentionally resisting the imposed political order. A more appropriate interpretation, I believe, is to recognize that the nationalistic theme is not as important as many social analysts tend to assume. While scholars interested in political power and totalitarianism are often sensitive to symbols vested with political meanings, these symbols might not be equally significant to the participants themselves. The symbolic approach of extracting etic meanings runs the risk of misinterpreting or overinterpreting informants’ actual experience. The operational mechanism of subjectivation and totalitarianism cannot be properly theorized without taking into account emic interpretations from below.

This is not to negate the significance and efficacy of the exercise in civic education and citizen making. Subjectivation takes place not at the discursive level, but it works through the embodiment of bodily culture and practice. In scholarly studies and popular commentaries on totalitarianism and socialism, the state is often presented as an imposing machine which maintains power by bombarding its subjects with ideological propaganda. Ideological brainwashing, however, is by no means the most effective mechanism of political control. Monotonous repetitions unavoidably reduce the most motivating ideological statement into empty gibberish. Even the most loyal disciple of the state cannot be totally blind to the
manipulative elements behind nationalistic propaganda. The more frequently an ideological statement is repeated, the thinner its meanings and impacts are. It becomes more and more difficult for sincere emotions to be aroused every time when the statement is pronounced. Sincerity is not relevant in ritual practice, nor is it a sustainable form of social order (Seligman et al. 2008). It is much more difficult to make subjects that think like the state than to make them behave in ways inscribed by the state. The ritualized exercise makes a good medium for embodiment precisely because its demands on bodily movements are much stronger than its demands on sincere belief.

This explains why form and context is so important in the exercise ritual. The ritual is observed at the same time at the same place every day. As the first scheduled event of every school day, the exercise sets the mood for the rest of the day. Its peculiar place at the schedule highlights its significance in framing the children’s daily routine. The morning exercise is the only occasion on an ordinary school day when children’s attire is inspected. While school uniforms are not mandatory at Shuiping, children are required to put on yellow caps (and red scarves if they are in the Communist Youth League) in order to present the visual image of a well-organized collective. During the radio gymnastic exercise, the performance of bodily moves is meticulously checked for. Teachers and class representatives patrol through the formation to keep substandard moves from disrupting the collective presentation of the group. All such meticulous details give a sense of formality to the exercise.

Moreover, there is a proto-militant undertone to the exercise. The exercise formation on the school courtyard resembles a military line-up. There are stringent requirements on the distance between students when in stand-by formation for the exercise. Under the command of the class representatives, students march in goose steps to adjust their positions if the class
formation is not perfectly in shape. The person in charge of the exercise is always a male teacher. With a microphone in hand, he becomes the authoritative figure to maintain order and discipline throughout the exercise. A teacher admitted that he tends to be louder and stricter than usual whenever he has the microphone in hand, because “otherwise the students would not listen.” Every teacher-in-charge uses a commanding tone when announcing the beginning and the end of the exercise. Imperative commands like “Stand straight!” and “Keep your spirits up!” are heard every time. While pre-or post-exercise speeches are sometimes conducted in the local dialect, the commands that frame the exercise and move it forward, such as “turn left/ right,” “start the music,” and “shout out the slogan,” are always issued in standard Mandarin, the official language and lingua franca of the Chinese state. The military undertone to the exercise reinforces the sense of order and discipline that permeates its form and implementation.

State choreographers are also aware of the central importance of forms and bodily movements when the exercise was designed. The first and foremost composing principle of the accompanying music is that the artistic expression and rhythm of the musical tune should “compromise to suit the bodily motions” (Beijing Daily 2009). As a “gymnastic expert” elaborates, although a good piece of musical composition should take on its own flow, its rhythm has to synchronize with the bodily movements if it is to be a candidate for accompanying the exercise. Bodily motions take precedence in determining when the pauses are and what the tempo of the music should be (Beijing Daily 2009). The Beijing Daily article on the history of radio gymnastic exercise reports that the practice of ending the exercise sequence with some “breathing exercises” was already in place since the initial implementation of the exercise in the 1950s. Consistent with the school principle’s assertion, the mere practice of shouting the slogan is more important than its literal content.
I find it helpful to draw the analytical focus to bodily practices (versus the symbolic meanings of the ritual) in interpreting the social and political significance of the exercise ritual. The state apparatus, I would argue, embodies participants with the ritual form rather than the ideological discourse. The sequence of bodily movement and the context in which it is carried out are charged with mechanisms of subjectivation and social control. Collective consciousness and militaristic discipline are reinforced through the form and organization of the exercise ritual. Nationalistic message will eventually lose its impacts with monotonous repetitions, whereas bodily practice forces participants into somatic engagement during every ritualistic performance. A totalitarian state is not one that attempts to brainwash its population with ideological propaganda. It is a political mechanism that successfully forces its imperatives into the everyday practices of its subjects. The very act of repetition itself demands the circumscription of desire and will: “repetition places the individual actor in a very particular relation to a body of practices (or even modes of speech and address), a way of being, which imposes obligations” (Seligman et al. 2008:120). Political control manifests itself even without overt evocation of nationalistic or state-related discourse.

**Failure of Ritual Performance and the Reconstitution of Social Order**

Putting the analytical focus on form and practice allows us to recognize the ambiguous elements in rituals and to factor them into our understanding of social order and discipline. As mentioned earlier, ritual performance can never attain its perfect form. Although ritual is by definition repetitive, absolute duplication of the exact event is never possible. Ritual work operates precisely at the process of “becoming.” As children strive towards a perfect performance every time when the exercise is reenacted, they participate in the subjectivation mechanism that socializes them with a state-inscribed body culture of an ideal Chinese citizen.
During my month-long observation of the radio gymnastic exercise at Shuiping, I have not once seen a flawless performance of the morning ritual. Here I identify the prototype of a perfect performance in the state promotional video, which is available online and to participating schools. Throughout the six-minute-long exercise, model participants in the exercise display extreme enthusiasm, dedication, and engagement. Immaculate in their attires and appearances, they energetically shoot their arms and their legs at the most precisely synchronized angle and rhythm. Individuals are in such unison that they look as if they are one. The brightness of their smiles convinces the audience that they thoroughly enjoy the exercise. In fact, teachers at Shuiping do have high demands over children’s bodily control as well as their emotional engagement. During the exercise, teachers occasionally issue commands such as “get your spirits high!” and “strengthen your back, be energetic!” Students are instructed not only to act but also to feel upbeat whenever the exercise music starts playing.

If this is the image of a perfect performance to which the state, the school, and the participants aspire, such ideal is never attainable. It is practically impossible to ensure that every one of the thousand participants does the proper move with the proper mood at the same time. Not a single exercise session has passed without a student, particularly in the back rows, who stops following the movements as soon as teachers turn their backs. Arms and legs are never raised at the right time at the right angle, especially towards the end of the exercise when the children become tired. Children find it difficult to sincerely enjoy the exercise. Neither marching under the blazing sun on a hot summer day nor waking up at 5:45am on a cold winter morning constitutes a particularly pleasant experience. A student confides that exercising under the summer heat is physically taxing, and yet she feels obliged to endure her discomforts because “one should always stay quiet during the exercise.” As children have to force themselves into
seeing the exercise as enjoyable, tardiness and alienations are inevitably generated. Even at the inter-class competition where exercise performance is supposed to be at its pristine form, the formality of the occasion was not immune from disturbances such as students lagging behind the class, forgetting their moves, and even tripping themselves on the ground. Ideal performance and exact repetitions are unattainable.

The imperfection opens up a space for the renewal of social order and hierarchy. Both unintended failure in and purposeful resistance to the ritual order give rise to occasions for public exercise of power and sanction. Disciplinary actions in the courtyard serve to maintain social order. Teachers and students are both engaged in maintaining a structural façade of a good performance at least during the ritual duration. Student representatives hand-picked by class teachers are given the responsibility to enforce order and to report on disobedience. Minor offences, such as missing some moves or failing to be emotionally upbeat, earn the child a good yell from the teacher. More serious disturbances to the ritual order, such as refusal to participate and open challenges to the teachers’ authority, are punishable by more overt public shaming such as kneeling in front of the entire formation. One child tells me, “the teacher punishes everybody in the class if (s)he cannot tell who exactly is chattering during the exercise. One person errs, the entire class suffers.” As anthropologists such as Max Gluckman points out, all ritual relies on the social acceptance of hierarchical roles, established categories, and authoritative procedures. Power is exercised and displayed in the exercise ritual. The maintenance of ritual order is de facto an affirmation of social order and the self-referential acknowledgment of the social hierarchy.

On the other hand, ritual also opens up the space for potential challenges to the established order. While the performance of bodily move is under close censorship, authority’s
control over participants’ thoughts is less efficient. The degree of somatic and emotional engagement in the exercise varies among individuals. Some children are resentful towards the ritual because of the physical and emotional demands imposed on them. Although it is always discursively emphasized that children should be persistent in exercising on their own initiatives, some children do not seem particularly inclined to observe the ritual unless supervised. Talks of fatigue and boredom could spread the negative emotions swirling around the morning exercise. False compliance, dissimulation, tardiness, slackness in moves, and even refusal to follow orders can all be interpreted as acts of resistance. A class representative, who is responsible for maintaining order during the morning exercise, complains to me that some of her classmates are always mean to her during the recesses. Variance and failure, both intentionally and unintentionally induced, threaten the sabotage of ritual order.

Teachers do not seem to be particularly enthusiastic about the rituals either. Besides the teacher-on-duty who has to stay alert during the entire ritual duration, most class teachers just stand in front of the formation and talk to each other. Teachers sometimes ridicule the discourse of self-motivation themselves by instigating lap running as one of the worst punishments that a rule breaking student can get. Some children said that they would rather stand outside of the classroom for half an hour than to run under the sun, because the former disciplinary means at least does not involve exhaustive physical labor. Exercising is good for one’s health and yet it is also associated with discipline and punishment. Such disturbances to ritual orders show that the authority is by no means in total control of how the morning exercise is interpreted. Its instrument for maintaining social order can also be used against it.

Ritual is by nature ambiguous, and it is often responsible for mediating the ambiguities in our social life. Situated at the boundary of the subjunctive world, its ambivalence and
indeterminacy opens up possibilities of recreations and changes. Despite (and because of) the fatigue and anxiety induced, unattainable perfection in ritual performance propels children to the incessant pursuit of order and discipline. The will to perfect bodily practice in itself constitutes and facilitates the embodiment of imposed ideals and social order. Failure to replicate the perfect performance is an inherent characteristic to ritual practices. They are unavoidable and also essential for the process to operate. Subjectivation through ritual practices work precisely at the boundaries – the between and betwixt zone that is characterized by struggles, tensions, and ambiguities of perfecting and becoming. Interpreting ritual practice as a pursuit for performance rather than for meanings, the recognition of its indeterminacy opens up possibilities of order reinforcement and social change.

**Conclusion: On Ritual Practice and Political Order**

Bringing practice theories and ritual studies into the examination of totalitarianism and political control, this paper hopes to illuminate the political process of subjectivation. Contrary to our instinctual understandings of Fascist and Leninist states, empty repetitions of political slogans and ideological statements are not effective instruments in inculcating nationalistic beliefs when they are not employed in and with the right context. The mechanism of subject-making instead lies at the ritual practice itself, which forces people into participating by both authoritative mandates (from both the state and the school) and coercive rationale (“exercise is for your own good”). Civic education and subject making operate even without ostentatious display of power and propaganda. It is often at the moments of ritual failures that the political structure confronts both the opportunities and the challenges to recreate social order and be recreated. The point of this paper is not to deny the importance of meaning and ideology. It simply suggests that the shift to practice as a theoretical point of departure could open up new
insights and avenues in research pertaining to political rituals and the state. It calls for scholarly attention to the indeterminacy and ambiguities inherent in the ritual process.

Throughout my month-long residence at Shuiping, I have tried repeatedly to transcribe the lyrics of the accompanying music to the exercise, but I never succeeded until I looked up the lyrics online after I left the field site. Under the blasting music at an open courtyard, it is very difficult to hear the lyrics clearly during the exercise ritual. I wonder if this is also the experience of the children. Their daily exposure to the music has probably reduced its lyrical contents into mere repetitions of empty words. In either case, the music itself – which provides the form to the exercise practice – is much more important than its literal content in this ritual context. Despite the Shuiping school motto of “strengthen the body [in order to] serve our motherland,” one does not, in practice, necessarily need a particularly strong body in order to serve the nation. The process of strengthening the body and the context in which it takes place, nevertheless, can largely be of use to the service of the state.
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Appendix 1

Lyrics of the Accompanying Music for the Exercise *Qicai Yangguang* (七彩陽光)

**Verse 1:**
金色的阳光召唤我 它也召唤你
我们奔向操场去 一起练身体
欢乐伴着我 欢乐伴着你
阳光体育使我们幸福又欢喜

**Verse 2:**
金色的阳光赞美我 它也赞美你
我们同在阳光下 一起练身体
健康属于我 健康属于你
阳光体育使我们健康又美丽

**Chorus:**
每天锻炼一小时
增强体魄 充满朝气
快快乐乐 欢欢喜喜 练出好身体
为我中华更强盛 大家齐努力

*Translation*

*Verse 1:* The Golden Sun is calling out for you and me.
Let us run to the courtyard and exercise our bodies together.
Happiness belongs to you and me.
Physical exercise is full of bliss and joy.

*Verse 2:* The Golden Sun is singing praises to you and me.
We exercise our bodies together under the sun.
Health belongs to you and me.
Physical exercise makes us happy and beautiful.

**Chorus:**
An hour of exercise everyday strengthens our bodies and enlivens our spirits.
The exercise is full of joy and happiness.
*Let us work hard together for the prosperity of our nation.*

(Translated by the paper author, with emphasis added)
## Appendix 2

**Daily Schedule of Shuiping Primary School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6am</td>
<td>Wake up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:10-6:30am</td>
<td><strong>Morning Exercise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:40-7:20am</td>
<td>Morning Self-studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:20-8am</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-8:20am</td>
<td>Morning reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:20am</td>
<td>Class 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:20-10am</td>
<td>Class 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-10:20am</td>
<td><strong>Exercise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:20-11am</td>
<td>Class 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:10-11:50am</td>
<td>Class 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:50am-12:20pm</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30pm-2:30pm</td>
<td>Afternoon Nap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:50-3:30pm</td>
<td>Class 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:30-3:35pm</td>
<td>Exercise to relax eye muscles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:45-4:25pm</td>
<td>Class 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:35-5:15pm</td>
<td>Class 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30-6:40pm</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:50-8:20pm</td>
<td>Evening Self studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30pm</td>
<td>Bed time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:40pm</td>
<td>Lights off</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>