Hidden rules preference in Chinese society: An Exploration of the Concept and the Construction of its Scale

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Besides the 'on the table' rules which could be openly discussed such as laws and other social norms, there are also another series of rules which is called Hidden Rule (潛規則 in Chinese), that only could be discussed 'under the table' about how to interact with others in Chinese society, that constituting dual rule structure along with the 'on the table' social order. In the view of functioning, individuals' preference towards Hidden Rule could maintain the social order on the surface while benefit individuals' self-interest with the methods under-table, which has the functional correspondence with the two level of conservatism presented by Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation. This research begins with the phenomena of hidden rule in daily life, then backtracks the traditional Chinese philosophical and historical origin. During the empirical study, we use the concept of 'rule preference' to construct the measurement of hidden rule preference, and establish the reliability and validity of the new measurement by using other measurements and behavior indexes. The result shows that 1) the new constructed measurement has good reliability, 2) the hidden rule preference and other measurements, including Right-Wing Authoritarian, Social Dominance Orientation, are interrelated but different concepts with each other, 3) and the hidden rule behavior indexes are significant related to the hidden rule preference, presenting the good validity of the hidden rule preference scale.

Keywords: conservatism, hidden rule, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation.

Extended Abstract

In Chinese society, so-called hidden rules (潛規則), a set of under-the-table social rules, coexists with regular social rules. The modern term "hidden rules" comes from Wu's (2001) best-selling book in China; however, many sayings in Chinese literature and language represent similar phenomena, such as yang-feng-yin-wei (陽奉陰違) and yang-li-yin-mou (陽禮陰謀). This research first considers the phenomena of hidden rules in daily life and its philosophical and historical origins, and then constructs a hidden rules preference (HRP) scale to study differences in individual preferences toward hidden rules.

The hidden rules phenomenon originates from the Chinese yin-yang (陰陽) philosophy, in which yang represents formal social rules and yin represents hidden rules. Based on this philosophy, the Chinese are accustomed to a world in which formal and hidden rules are, to an extent, inconsistent, but they accept this inconsistency to maintain interpersonal harmony. Since the Confucian school became official ideology during the Han dynasty, the yin-yang philosophy along with the Confucian and Legalist doctrines have become yang-ru-yin-fa (陽儒陰法) in politics. The yang represents the Confucian social norms that provide ruling legitimacy, and the yin represents the Legalist techniques that form administrative methods. Living in such a Confucian-Legalist empire, Chinese society has developed a coping strategy, yang-feng-yin-wei, meaning that individuals openly follow formal norms while privately following hidden rules.

Although Taiwan and mainland China have

modernized and have different political structures than the ancient Chinese Empire, this interaction pattern may remain as it has become part of the culture and is passed on through daily language. Meanwhile, many social situations today are vague and lack clear cues, and thus a preference for the hidden rules may be an important predictor of behavior.

Based on this background, we define HRP as an individual's preference for under-the-table social rules and construct a single-factor questionnaire using a deductive approach. Theoretically, HRP has two concurrent functional levels: the yang-li (陽禮) level to maintain social order on the surface, and the yin-mou (陰謀) level to tolerate or adapt the under-the-table methods and keep them hidden without disturbing the social order. Regarding individuals' functioning, preference for the hidden rules might maintain social order on the surface while benefiting individuals' self-interest through under-the-table methods. This functionally corresponds to the two levels of conservatism represented by right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO).

To ensure the validity of the scale, we chose the RWA and SDO scales as its functional criteria despite their different theoretical and cultural backgrounds. We also included six scales to measure HRP's discriminant validity, such as ren-qing-shi-gu, ren-qing orientation, harmony orientation, uncertainty avoidance, self-monitoring, and aggression. These have similar wordings to or superficial relationships with the hidden rules

phenomena although they function differently. In addition, we compiled a set of behavioral items based on following or violating hidden rules to measure participants' attitudes toward these behaviors.

We used a questionnaire to collect four samples from Taiwanese and mainland Chinese participants ($N_1 = 258$, $N_2 = 258$, $N_3 = 544$, $N_4 = 141$). Each sample included HRP and parts of the other criterion measurements. The HRP scale in Sample 1 consisted of 10 items. After the analysis, deletion, and modification of items, the second HRP scale had seven items and was retested in Samples 2 and 3. In Sample 4, we modified the wording of some items to improve their understandability without changing their meaning, and this was the final version of the HRP scale. In all four samples, HRP showed a single factor structure and good reliability, with a moderate degree of correlation with RWA and SDO. HRP and other measurements, such as RWA and SDO, were interrelated but different, indicating the uniqueness of the HRP construct. In addition, the hidden rules behavior indexes were significantly related to HRP, demonstrating the validity of the HRP scale.

The newly constructed HRP scale showed good reliability and validity, and its functioning in Chinese society is similar to that of conservatism in the Western context. In future research, HRP could be used to study unique social interaction patterns in Chinese society and to discover the similarities and differences between conservatism in Chinese and Western cultures.