

From Unidirectional to Bidirectional: The Reshaping of Symbolic Communication by Youth Behaviors in the Tiananmen Flag-Raising Ceremony

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Abstract: The participation of Chinese youth in the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony represents a feedback mechanism within the national apparatus for promoting patriotic education. This feedback is evidenced not only by the frequent choices of young people to wake up early or forgo sleep during public holidays to secure front-row positions at the ceremony but also by their practice of uploading personal videos of the event to social media platforms. As a symbolic act, the flag-raising ceremony conveys profound meanings of state authority, historical legacy, and national identity. For the youth, it is not merely a recurring ritual but an emotional expression of their connection to the nation, society, and collective heritage. Within the framework of the Interaction Ritual Chain theory, the symbolic communication of the flag-raising ceremony has traditionally been perceived as unidirectional, directed from the state to its citizens. However, the widespread dissemination of related VLOGs, videos, and images on social media in recent years has enriched the ceremony's symbolic significance and created new layers of meaning. When "running at dawn to witness the flag-raising" becomes a behavioral symbol, traditional symbols such as "Tiananmen Square," "the Five-Star Red Flag," and "the military's marching step" evolve into "historical imagery" to a certain extent. Concurrently, the act of running at dawn reflects the youth's active engagement with and reinterpretation of these symbols within the context of the flag-raising ceremony. This process of reverse symbolic interaction, initiated by youth participation, completes the theoretical framework of the Interaction Ritual Chain by forming a closed loop of symbolic interaction.

Keywords: Tiananmen Flag-Raising Ceremony, Chinese Youth, Interaction Ritual Chain, Symbolic Communication, Patriotism.

1. Introduction

The Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony, as a significant national ritual in China, has carried profound political symbolism and cultural significance since the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949 (Bai, 2023). The raising of the first Five-Star Red Flag at Tiananmen Square marked the birth of the new nation and endowed the ceremony with enduring historical importance. Since then, Tiananmen Square has become a key venue for national events, and the flag-raising ceremony has served as a powerful symbol of national sovereignty and unity. Core symbols of the ceremony, including Tiananmen Square, the military's marching step, and the Five-Star Red Flag, represent China's sovereignty, military discipline, and revolutionary victory. These visual symbols are continually reinforced through the daily ritual, becoming a critical part of collective memory and national identity, as well as an emotional bond for the Chinese people.

In recent years, Chinese youth have demonstrated immense enthusiasm for the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony. During holidays, many young individuals gather at Tiananmen Square as early as dawn or even the night before, aiming to secure the best viewing positions (Chen et al., 2020). They also capture their experiences through short videos, vlogs, and photographs, uploading these to social media platforms, which has significantly amplified the dissemination of patriotic symbols associated with the ceremony. The active participation and sharing by young people have elevated the ceremony's significance beyond traditional patriotic education, giving rise to a broader interactive cultural

phenomenon.

This study employs the framework of Interaction Ritual Chain theory to explore how the participation of youth in the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony drives the dissemination and innovation of symbolic meanings. Youth behavior has transformed the ceremony from a unidirectional mode of communication to a bidirectional interaction. Through phenomena such as "running at dawn to witness the flag-raising," this study reveals how the public assigns new symbolic meanings to state rituals, thereby influencing cultural identity and mechanisms of dissemination. This process not only extends the application of Interaction Ritual Chain theory but also provides a new perspective for studying the relationship between national rituals and public behavior.

2. From Ritual to Ritual: Tiananmen in the Context of Historical Interactive Practices

The Interaction Ritual Chain theory, developed by sociologist Randall Collins, focuses on the generation of emotional energy and the production of symbols through social interactions, which in turn construct group identity and social order. According to this theory, a successful ritual requires four key components: a shared focus of attention, emotional resonance, the creation of symbolic representations, and clearly defined participant roles (Huang, Yang & Meng, 2023). Within this framework, the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony exemplifies the characteristics of a classic interaction ritual through its highly standardized procedures and powerful symbolic significance.

The Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony, first held on October 1, 1949, alongside the raising of the first Five-Star Red Flag at Tiananmen Square, marked the founding of the People's Republic of China. Since then, it has evolved into a formalized state practice (Lin, 2024). Its core elements—such as the military's marching step, the raising of the national flag, and the playing of the March of the Volunteers (The National Anthem of China)—constitute the ceremony's focal points, generating emotional resonance among participants. The Five-Star Red Flag symbolizes revolutionary victory and embodies the historical memory of China's pursuit of sovereignty and national rejuvenation (Yoon & Seo, 2023). The military's precise marching step reflects the discipline and dignity of the armed forces, safeguarding national security. Meanwhile, March of the Volunteers evokes deep recognition of the revolutionary spirit among onlookers. Collectively, these elements not only reinforce the symbolic importance of national sovereignty but also provide participants with a unified emotional focus.

The Interaction Ritual Chain theory posits that a successful ritual must fulfill certain conditions, all of which are exemplified in the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony (Wang et al., 2023). First, the ceremony's focal points, such as the raising of the national flag, the disciplined military march, and the solemn music, command the complete attention of participants. Second, emotional resonance is achieved through collective actions such as standing solemnly, saluting the flag, and singing the national anthem in unison, synchronizing individual emotions into a collective experience. Third, the symbolic representations of the ceremony—including the Five-Star Red Flag, Tiananmen Square, and the military's marching step—serve as critical carriers of collective memory, which are continuously reinforced through repetition and internalized as historical memory and national identity. Finally, the clearly defined roles of the ceremony—performed by the military honor guard and observed by the audience through respectful gestures—establish the framework for interaction.

Traditionally, the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony has been viewed as a unidirectional act of patriotic education, orchestrated by the state to instill national pride and historical memory among citizens (Rao, 2023). Through its daily standardized process, the ceremony internalizes feelings of national identity and pride within the public. The raising of the Five-Star Red Flag evokes the historical memory of revolutionary victory, while Tiananmen Square, as the site of many pivotal historical events, further strengthens the emotional connection between the public and the state. However, the Interaction Ritual Chain theory offers a new perspective: the emotional energy generated by rituals is not solely the product of top-down communication but can also be sustained and amplified through active public participation and feedback, forming what Collins refers to as a “feedback loop” or “emotional closure” (Xie & Li, 2023). In recent years, the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony has transcended its traditional unidirectional model, with public engagement and behavioral feedback injecting new dynamism into the ritual.

The Interaction Ritual Chain theory emphasizes the generation and amplification of emotional energy, a phenomenon that is vividly embodied in the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony (Meng et al., 2022). Emotional energy is initially generated through the symbolic communication and atmospheric resonance of the ceremony itself, and it is further extended into broader social spaces through public

participation. Youth, as the primary participants in the flag-raising ceremony, experience intense patriotic emotions through their engagement (Huang, 2022). These patriotic sentiments stem from the reflections of their childhood on the stories behind the Five-Star Red Flag and their expectations for the continuation of its significance. Stories of devotion to the nation may have once seemed like routine spiritual anchors, but the historical narratives and the red revolutionary spirit derived from them have transformed into transmissible cultural genes and symbols (Wong et al., 2023).

This emotional resonance is not only displayed on-site during the ceremony but is also widely disseminated through modern practices such as filming short videos and sharing photographs on social media platforms (Tang & Pan, 2020). On one hand, youth perceive their act of running to witness the flag-raising as a collective festivity; on the other, they subconsciously inspire and call upon their peers spiritually. Patriotism, as they express, is no longer confined to stirring slogans or heart-wrenching revolutionary tales. Instead, patriotism is manifested in running at dawn in a flourishing nation to watch the Five-Star Red Flag rise alongside the sun. These recorded moments, captured in time, transform into digital imagery—a new form of symbolic representation.

Through these actions, the emotional energy of the flag-raising ceremony is amplified, enriching and extending its symbolic meanings. Public participation and dissemination not only sustain the ceremony's influence but also drive the dynamic reproduction of its symbolic significance. This process further validates the concept of emotional closure within the framework of the Interaction Ritual Chain theory.

The Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony not only embodies the Interaction Ritual Chain theory but also reflects the evolving relationship between rituals and state narratives (Lin, 2023). Historically, the ceremony has served as a visual and performative manifestation of political sovereignty, particularly during times of national transformation. For example, its inception coincided with the founding of the People's Republic of China, symbolizing a break from colonial oppression and internal strife to a unified, sovereign state. Beyond reinforcing political ideologies, the ceremony acts as a repository of collective aspirations, aligning the past with a vision of progress and unity.

Additionally, the ceremony's visual and auditory elements are designed to evoke a multisensory experience, ensuring a lasting impression on participants. The disciplined march of the military is not just a display of physical precision but a metaphor for order and national strength. Meanwhile, the national anthem creates an auditory bridge that connects the individual participant to the collective memory of revolutionary sacrifice. This interplay of sensory inputs magnifies emotional resonance, a critical component of Interaction Ritual Chain theory. In the digital era, the traditional boundaries of rituals are increasingly blurred. The Tiananmen ceremony, once confined to a physical space, now exists in virtual forms through live broadcasts and social media. These digital extensions amplify its reach and adapt it to contemporary cultural contexts, offering an avenue for diasporic communities to reconnect with national identity. This transformation underscores the adaptability of rituals in preserving their symbolic relevance across time and space.

3. From Patriotism to Patriotism: Youth in the Process of Symbolic Interaction

In recent years, the millennial generation of Chinese youth has demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm for the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony. This behavior not only reflects a direct expression of patriotic sentiment but also signifies their deep engagement with the nation, its history, and its cultural identity. Growing up during a critical period of China's development, this generation has undergone systematic patriotic education and been profoundly influenced by the nation's prosperity and social stability. By participating in the flag-raising ceremony, they have further strengthened their emotional connection with the country, while actively disseminating national symbols, thereby establishing a distinctive model of patriotic behavior in the contemporary era (Kielman, 2020).

Born around the year 2000, the millennial generation matured during a time of rapid economic growth and China's rising global prominence (Zhang & Ma, 2023). Compared to earlier generations, they have been more thoroughly exposed to formal patriotic education, with the flag-raising ceremony serving as a critical component of school curricula. From primary school to high school, regular flag-raising ceremonies—featuring the hoisting of the Five-Star Red Flag, the performance of *The March of the Volunteers*, and speeches—have reinforced their emotional attachment to the nation. These rituals have cultivated their understanding of national sovereignty and ethnic unity while fostering a sense of collective belonging.

In recent years, the content of patriotic education has evolved, from highlighting the achievements of reform and opening-up to emphasizing the “Chinese Dream.” Major national holidays, such as National Day, and key anniversaries, such as the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, have featured flag-raising ceremonies broadcast on television and social media. These diverse mediums have rendered patriotic sentiments more vivid and relatable, further deepening millennials' engagement with the nation's ideals (Xu, 2021). The Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony, in particular, has captivated this demographic, who exhibit a high degree of initiative and ritualistic involvement. Many young participants rise early or stay awake overnight to secure the best vantage points. This profound engagement not only demonstrates a strong identification with national symbols but also reinforces their emotional bond with the state through embodied practices. Standing in silence, saluting the flag, or singing the national anthem during the ceremony evoke deep emotional resonance (Wang, 2022). Through these ritualistic practices, individual emotions synchronize with the collective, transforming personal identification into collective solidarity. This emotional connection also serves as a foundation for their future engagement with national development and public affairs. The flag-raising ceremony is not merely a venue for emotional expression; it is also a site for the reenactment and internalization of historical memory. The raising of the Five-Star Red Flag symbolizes the victories of the Chinese revolution, while Tiananmen Square, as a witness to the founding of the People's Republic, strengthens young people's connection to the nation's history. Through their participation, youth internalize the historical achievements of New China as part of their collective memory.

In particular, the proliferation of educational initiatives and media content during the millennials' formative years has vividly presented the history of New China. Examples include patriotic films such as *The Founding of a Republic* and *The Founding of an Army*, as well as school-organized activities focused on “red culture.” These resources have helped young people develop a concrete understanding of key historical events and revolutionary ideals, which are further reinforced through participation in the flag-raising ceremony (Liu, 2022). By engaging in this ritual, they not only deepen their comprehension of history but also forge emotional connections with the past.

Traditionally, the flag-raising ceremony has been a state-led activity aimed at disseminating patriotic ideals. However, today's youth, through personalized media practices, have become important agents in the transmission of symbols. They document the ceremony through short videos and other formats, adding unique perspectives and emotional narratives to the experience. These individual contributions enrich the symbolic framework of the ceremony, making it more diverse and accessible. This grassroots dissemination enhances the societal impact of the flag-raising ceremony, reflecting the millennials' sense of responsibility and cultural creativity. By participating in and propagating the flag-raising ceremony, the millennial generation demonstrates a distinctive pathway of patriotism in the modern era. They are not merely recipients of patriotic education but active contributors to national narratives (Huang, 2022). Through their actions, youth connect personal emotions with national symbols, reproducing and extending traditional meanings in innovative ways. Their behavior adapts patriotic education to the context of modern social life, providing new avenues for national identity and symbolic communication in contemporary society.

The millennial generation's engagement with the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony goes beyond mere attendance, reflecting a nuanced evolution of patriotic expression shaped by their unique historical context (Xie & Li, 2023). Raised during a period of economic reforms and increased global integration, these youth navigate a dual identity: proud heirs of their nation's revolutionary legacy and active participants in its contemporary resurgence on the global stage. This duality is vividly expressed through their behaviors at the ceremony, which balance reverence for traditional symbols with a desire to redefine their meanings in a modern context.

One notable aspect of this generation's interaction is their use of digital tools to reinterpret and propagate the ceremony's significance. While previous generations primarily experienced patriotic rituals as spectators, millennials actively participate as creators of content, turning the ceremony into a platform for peer-to-peer communication. This shift redefines the role of public rituals from being exclusively state-driven to a co-constructed experience between the state and its citizens.

Furthermore, this generation's affinity for blending personal narratives with collective symbols is evident in the content they produce. For instance, a short video capturing the flag-raising ceremony may juxtapose traditional elements, such as the Five-Star Red Flag, with personal commentary about the importance of youth in shaping the nation's future. This fusion of personal and collective identities enriches the symbolic resonance of the ceremony, making it more relatable to contemporary audiences.

4. From Unidirectional to Bidirectional: Running at Dawn in a Flourishing Era

As a behavioral symbol of the younger generation, “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” reflects not only contemporary youth’s emotional investment in the nation but also offers a new interpretive perspective for the generation and dissemination of symbols within the framework of Interaction Ritual Chain theory. This behavior, transitioning from emotional resonance to symbolic production and active dissemination, completes the shift from unidirectional communication to bidirectional interaction (Qian & Fan, 2023). At the same time, it extends the symbolic framework of traditional patriotic education. In conventional narratives, the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony has primarily been viewed as a state-driven, unidirectional communication tool designed to instill patriotic education through structured rituals and solemnity. However, the emergence of “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” signifies a shift in public engagement from passive reception to active participation. This transformation not only enriches the symbolic framework of the ceremony but also achieves the “emotional closure” proposed in Interaction Ritual Chain theory.

“Running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” exemplifies a paradigm shift in how public rituals are experienced and interpreted. This behavior underscores a proactive engagement that challenges traditional notions of passive reception in state ceremonies. Rather than merely attending as observers, participants imbue their actions with symbolic significance, creating a dialogue between personal agency and institutional narratives.

The act of running to the ceremony, often undertaken in the early hours of the morning, reflects a symbolic journey (Zeng, Chen & Meng, 2024). It represents the effort and commitment of youth to engage with their national identity actively. The physicality of this act contrasts with the static solemnity of the ceremony itself, creating a dynamic interaction between movement and stillness, individual effort and collective experience (Lin et al., 2022). This juxtaposition highlights the evolving nature of patriotic rituals as spaces for both reflection and action. Moreover, the dissemination of this behavior through digital platforms elevates it to a new level of cultural significance. What begins as an individual’s journey to Tiananmen Square becomes part of a shared narrative, inspiring others to engage with the ritual in creative and personalized ways. These digital narratives often incorporate elements of humor, storytelling, and artistic expression, broadening the cultural resonance of the ceremony and making it accessible to diverse audiences. By framing “running at dawn” as a contemporary symbol, it also opens discussions about the intersection of tradition and modernity. This behavior serves as a reminder that patriotic expression is not static but evolves with societal changes, reflecting the aspirations and values of each new generation.

Youth behaviors, such as queuing at dawn, running to secure positions, and recording videos, imbue the flag-raising ceremony with heightened emotional and cultural significance. These behaviors, facilitated through online and offline interactions, expand the symbolic meaning of the ceremony into broader social contexts. Through active documentation and sharing, the younger generation reinterprets core symbols of the ceremony, such as the Five-Star Red Flag and Tiananmen Square, diversifying their

symbolic meanings (Wong, 2022). This bidirectional interaction between public behaviors and national symbols not only deepens emotional investment in the ritual but also completes the interactive feedback loop of symbolic production and dissemination.

The cultural significance of “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” can be analyzed on two levels. First, it represents a response to and continuation of traditional national symbols. Symbols such as the Five-Star Red Flag, Tiananmen Square, and the Monument to the People’s Heroes embody the revolutionary history and narrative of national rejuvenation in New China. Through their proactive participation, youth strengthen their emotional connections with these symbols, demonstrating a profound recognition of the nation’s history. Second, this behavioral symbol reflects the unique patriotic expression of the younger generation in the contemporary era (Marjerison & Gan, 2022). Distinct from traditional symbols, “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” carries strong temporal characteristics, illustrating how youth raised in a flourishing and stable China actively express their sense of national responsibility. This symbolic meaning transcends the conventional framework of patriotic education, highlighting the cultural creativity and emotional autonomy of the younger generation. It is not merely an act of emotional expression but also an independent, symbolized behavior that adds new dimensions to the national symbolic system. The emergence of “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” enriches the symbolic framework of the flag-raising ceremony and enhances the temporal adaptability of traditional national rituals. This process of bidirectional symbolic generation demonstrates the dynamic interaction between youth and national symbols, shifting patriotic education from unidirectional dissemination to a model of spontaneous and diverse public participation. It underscores how public behaviors have evolved from passive acceptance into a driving force for symbolic production. Through the interplay between behavioral and traditional symbols, the cultural value of the flag-raising ceremony is preserved and innovated in the modern era, showcasing the vitality and adaptability of national rituals. As “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” gradually becomes a symbol and even a cultural image, the meanings of the Five-Star Red Flag, Tiananmen Square, and The March of the Volunteers have, to some extent, undergone an elevation, further ennobling their patriotic significance. Contemporary Chinese youth have expressed their profound sense of national identity and unique sense of responsibility in their own ways.

5. Conclusion

The Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony, as a significant national ritual in China, carries profound historical memory and political significance. In the context of contemporary development, it has evolved into a critical site for interaction between the public and national symbols (Xu, 2021). Adopting the framework of Interaction Ritual Chain theory, this study analyzes how the ceremony facilitates a shift from unidirectional communication to bidirectional interaction through the generation and dissemination of emotional energy. By focusing on the behaviors of the younger generation, it highlights how the emergence of the symbolic act of “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” not only enriches the symbolic framework of the ritual but also establishes new mechanisms of interaction between public behaviors and national narratives. The findings reveal that millennials in

China actively imbue traditional national symbols with new cultural meanings through their participation in and dissemination of the flag-raising ceremony. From historical inheritance to innovative practices, this generation demonstrates their sense of responsibility and creativity through personal actions, media expression, and symbolic reconstruction. In this process, the concept of “emotional closure” in Interaction Ritual Chain theory is further validated, as the relationship between the state and the public transitions from unidirectional symbolic communication to dynamic, bidirectional generation.

Furthermore, “running at dawn to witness the flag-raising” has emerged as a symbolic behavior of the new era, reflecting the youth’s emotional connection to the nation and their active role in patriotic education. This symbol transcends traditional historical imagery, showcasing the unique ways in which contemporary youth intertwine their identities with the destiny of the nation. It also introduces new possibilities for the dissemination of national symbols in the digital age.

In conclusion, this study, by examining the practices and symbolic communication of the younger generation in the context of the Tiananmen flag-raising ceremony, not only enriches the application of Interaction Ritual Chain theory but also provides a new academic perspective for understanding the bidirectional interaction between national rituals and public behaviors. The findings suggest that the mechanisms of national ritual dissemination are shifting from a singular state-led model to a mode of diversified public participation. This transformation enhances the temporal adaptability and cultural vitality of national symbols, offering valuable insights for the future of patriotic education and cultural identity formation.

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