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This research constructs the duality-oriented political settlements framework through structuration theory. With immense conflicts and inequality of global development, the underlying power distribution and institutional evolution in the South, however, are not fully elucidated due to the dualism-driven disagreements. With the duality of structure, our research investigates the dialectical structure-agency relationship in socio-political interaction, mediating dualism into the power structuration process, followed by a case examination of the Peiyang Republic of China 1912–1928. The results illustrate that the duality-oriented framework settles the limitations on account of static power structure and convoluted agency. The findings reveal the evolving nature of political settlements, whereby institutions are used and reconstituted by the praxes of agents. Analysing the interaction between power agents and structures, this research reinterprets political settlements as dynamic reproduction of power systems for broader development and conflict studies.

Keywords: political settlements framework; structuration theory; duality of structure; power distribution; institution

POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS FRAMEWORK AND STRUCTURATION THEORY

1. Introduction

The political settlements framework plays a role in studying institutional evolution, especially critical to the inequality of global development. Within the globe wherein 8.2 billion human beings reside across very different institutional settings, inequality brings about immense development challenges of conflicts to society (Stewart & Samman, 2014). Fewer than 1.3 billion inhabitants live in more developed regions, accounting for 15.9% of world population (United Nations, 2024); by contrast—with 1.4 billion in China, a same amount in India, and 1.2 billion in Sub-Saharan Africa—a significant majority remains deprived of capabilities and resources in the Global South (Sen, 1999), left out of the global development benefits. The inequality and challenges are exacerbated by institutional constraints (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Stewart & Samman, 2014, pp. 108–109; Hulme & Krishnan, 2021) since our age is called Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002; Lovelock, 2020), when human agency generates constant institutional evolution similar to environmental change. Therefore, to settle conflicts and mitigate inequality, studying institutional settings and human agency involved is crucial. Hereto, the political settlements dictate the underlying power distribution contested among elites and non-elites, constituting institutional dynamics and development outcomes.

Within African and global development studies, the political settlements framework is vital for understanding the dynamics of power distribution, institutional evolution, and elite bargaining. The states and institutions are built on the settlements—the evolutionary power distribution between contending (non-)elite groups (Putzel & Di John, 2009; Khan, 2010). The settlements combine power and institutions, sustainably and compatibly, implying that the institution-based distribution of benefits and institutional changes ought to align with power distribution. Such a combination transcends the simplistic institutional dichotomy (Acemoglu et al., 2001, see Chang, 2010). Khan (2018a, 2018b) regards political settlements as a social order capable of reproducing itself, (re)built on the complex non-cooperative game under the power structure. This regard centres on the interaction of power and institutions, where settlements derive from the relative holding power of different groups contesting resource distribution (ibid., 2010; Behuria et al., 2017). However, Kelsall (2018a) argues for the cooperative settlements of elite agreements in resolving conflicts. With commendable zeal

in conflict resolution and negotiation, Kelsall's critique counts on real-world experience of post-conflict states. Khan's framework grasps the reproduction and institutional changes of states, whereas Kelsall's elite approach interprets the means to agree on a consensus. The disagreements reveal the complexity of political settlements, as South states are frequently confronted with fragile institutions and power conflicts.

Yet, the complex available literature exacerbates its relative dualism and dichotomy, either underestimating the structural properties of institutional culture and ideology in the power system reproduction at the macro level, or neglecting the micro derivations and other explanatory variables in political settlements (Behuria et al., 2017; Gray, 2018; Cummings, 2024). Without variables capable of forward or backward ratiocination, even a dynamic framework risks appearing static or cumbersome. Moreover, recognising the significant impact of those powerful elites notwithstanding, the broader structural derivations remain vague, diminishing the utility of research. For example, downplaying how elite agency challenges the structure within specific historical contexts might trigger the negligence of established power structure. By acknowledging the settlements evolving in the interaction between power structure and agency, structuration theory enables our research to reinterpret a more explicit dynamic framework to uncover how institutions reproduce through structural properties and agency actions (Giddens, 1979, 1986). In short, structuration theory, with its duality of structure, offers a promising theoretical base for mediating a pragmatic and eclectic approach focused on the structure-agency dynamic interaction and its impact on the evolution of political settlements.

Our research aims to be eclectic and pragmatic. In other words, our attempt hopes to strengthen the utility in academic research and policy practice by incorporating structuration theory into political settlements, specifically, its duality of structure. This theory grasps the dynamics between structure and agency, where power structure both supports and constrains agency, and is changed through the actions of agency. Consequently, our duality-oriented framework adds to the literature with a more nuanced understanding of the reproduction of political settlements. This framework operates in three steps: identifying the established structure as the medium in historical contexts, analysing the actions that agents exercise their agency with the medium, and unpacking the structural outcomes of the interactive actions in

power distribution. It also allows extension into broader contexts, such as gender justice, environmental change, and the general political economy of development. Concisely, the aim is to bridge theoretical disagreements towards an integrative approach to understanding power structuration and institutional evolution.

Additionally, our research acknowledges that historical evidence is crucial in studying political settlements. The Republic of China (1912–1928) case uncovers why and how China achieved durable and sustainable political settlements, thus proving the applicability of our framework. China's vast territory and population make it a compelling case. With over 1.4 billion inhabitants in a geography of 9.6 million square kilometres (United Nations, 2024), maintaining political stability across such diversity and extensivity is challenging. The European Union, in comparison, covers only 4 million square kilometres with a population of 448 million in 2024, the same amount as China one century ago when it was the Republic of China—the numbers spotlight the complexity of governing extensivity and diversity. The Republic of China offers a historical case to investigate the evolutionary political settlements amidst internal fragmentation and turbulence against central authority. The newborn republic represents an era when China's territorial integrity was under immense strain, yet the structure-agency interaction nudged the settlements and subsequent order of power systems. Our investigation examines how and what elites interacted within fragile institutions across vast geopolitics. The lessons share China's story of power contests and political settlements, proving the approach applicable to institutional changes in broader Global South contexts.

With structuration theory, the research fills several gaps, for instance: 1) conceptual and theoretical gaps, elaborating on critical concepts and advancing the explanatory power; 2) evidence and empirical gaps, introducing a duality-directed three-step investigation with our historical examination to extend the interpretation beyond African contexts to broader South and global studies; and 3) policy practice gaps, offering insights for development governance. Briefly, elucidating the agency-structure interaction and concepts is required to enhance the explanatory power of the analytical framework. This attempt hopes to broaden the theoretical explanation scope of institutional outcomes, mediating the disagreements between elite cooperation and conflict-driven power reproduction. The mediation is to raise critical insights that challenge, yet complement, the existing literature, deepening ideas conducive to studying

power dynamics and institutional changes. Ultimately, it aspires to inspire future theoretical developments in political settlements.

The remainder is structured as follows. Section 2 starts with the duality of structure in structuration theory to invoke the theoretical perspective for our reinterpretation. Section 3 interprets the disagreements between Khan and Kelsall to clarify why and where the duality mediates and supplements the approach in research and practice. Section 4 constructs the duality-oriented framework, reinterpreting what and how our approach operates within the three-step investigation. Section 5 illustrates the explanatory power of the framework with an examination of the Republic of China case. Section 6 recaps our discussion, followed by conclusions and implications.

2. Duality of Structure and Structuration Theory

Anthony Giddens (1976/2007, 1979, 1986) elucidates the critical concept of 'duality of structure', mediating the contradictory perspectives of structure and agency. This concept, duality of structure, highlights that structure and agency are not mutually exclusive and contradictory, as both the conditions and consequences of action are inclusive of the structure (Giddens, 1979, pp. 49–53). Succinctly, structure constrains our agency in actions, whilst the actions simultaneously sustain and adjust the structure (ibid., pp. 69–73). This relationship of interdependence settles the dualism of exclusive structure-versus-agency perspectives, integrating into the duality that delivers a more dynamic and holistic analytical framework for social research. Naturally, given the complexity of the structure-agency relationship, the duality of structure is confronted with criticism from different schools of thought; nonetheless, structuration theory offers a constructive settlement for the static, simplistic dualism.

To employ the constructive framework of structuration theory in social research, it is essential to move beyond dualism to duality in understanding structure and agency. Prior to the construction of the duality of structure, the philosophy of action downplayed institutions and power relations, confined by 'the nature of reasons or intentions' in human action rather than any structure (Giddens, 1979, p. 50). On the other hand, structural functionalism either intentionally or unintentionally connived at the notion that objects (structures) controlled and

even overrode subjects (agents) (ibid., pp. 51–52). Although the schools evolved and shared fresh contributions, the antinomy between structure and agency remained for a long time. Following Giddens' reasoning on this antinomy, it is interesting that such dualism either considers agents as inanimate machines controlled by structures or completely ostracises the significance of institutions and structures (Giddens, 1986, see the critical response, e.g., to Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Talcott Parsons)—the ultimate conclusion of dualism is specious. To settle this dualism into duality, Giddens recognises the dialectical relationship of the interdependence between agency and structure.

Apropos the dialectical structuration theory, society signifies those outstanding social systems with 'structural principles' producing a definite 'clustering of institutions across time and space' (Giddens, 1986, pp. 164–165). It is a dynamic process reproduced in the structure by agents. First, the structures and institutions are summarised as 'rules and resources … implicated in the reproduction of social systems' (ibid., 1979, pp. 64–66; 1986, pp. 375–377). Rules and resources are used by agents in the interactive production process and reconstituted through the interaction simultaneously (ibid., 1979, p. 71). Specifically, the structure implies the 'structuring properties' with a time-space embedded in social systems, which is employed to dissect the relations of mediation and derivation within system reproduction (Giddens, 1986, pp. 17, 24). The structural properties are not only the medium of agency, but also the outcome. In the process of social reproduction, the structure serves as the foundational conditions for human action; meanwhile, the actions generate new rules and resources, moving the social structure into a history of dynamic time-space development. Additionally, when studying the social system reproduction from the perspective of structure, it is notable that a structure cannot exercise agency as human agents possess agency but structures do not.

Second, regarding knowledge and agency, the actions involve the process of reflexive monitoring (with discursive consciousness), rationalisation (with practical consciousness), and motivation (potential of action) (Giddens, 1986, pp. 3–13; Werlen & Lippuner, 2009). Concisely, agents constantly monitor their behaviours and the consequences to react to the evolving social conditions, reproducing the structure (structural properties) through the process of daily praxes—this structuration process is where social constraints evolve and are established within the time-space dynamics. Hence, structuration theory grasps action as a

'continuous flow of conduct' which involves a 'stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings' in the praxes of real-world activities (Giddens, 1976/2007, p. 81; 1979, pp. 55–56). However, it is mistaken to simplify the relationship between actions and their consequence. Subject to our imperfect knowledge and the complexity of agency, unintended consequences often happen to the structure. In summary, agents are not merely overridden by the structure but also the producer subjects of that. Giddens reveals the process of the structure-agency interaction in social systems to settle the dualism problem, stressing that society implies dynamic systems, intentionally or unintentionally sustained and adjusted by praxes, rather than a static external equilibrium. It is commendable that structuration theory introduces this dynamic agency-praxis perspective into social research.

The connotation of dynamics is crucial. Giddens invokes the concepts of temporality and spatiality to articulate the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. The social praxes are always conducted within specific times and spaces, forming what Giddens calls 'time-space distanciation' (Giddens, 1986, pp. 170–182). This distanciation refers to the continuity of social interaction and the connection between the past and present. For example, Giddens (1981, pp. 19–20) arranges time from the flow of day-to-day life (durée of activity) to the long-term development of social institutions (longue durée of institutions). According to the duality of structure, every moment of human action contains within it the long-term distanciation of institutions (ibid.; Giddens, 1986). This insight dissolves the static antinomy, transcending the evanescence of static structures and the improvidence of isolated actions.

Additionally, it is rewarding to distinguish between the concepts of structure and system. A structure refers to the rules and resources involved in the reproduction of social systems, playing a role in the (re)constitution of agents and social praxes, and exists in the production time-space of the constitution process (Giddens, 1979, p. 5). For another, social systems are the reproduced systemic relations of social interaction, organised praxes, and a 'structured totality' (ibid., pp. 62–66). A system is characterised by structural properties, but it is never the structure itself. Hereto, structure implies the property nature of social systems embedded in the time-space relations and praxes of system reproduction.

Overall, along the 'duality of structure' and 'time-space distanciation', structuration theory is a significant contribution to reinterpreting the relationship between structure and

agency. The concepts underpinning structuration elucidate 'the structuring of social relations across time and space', involving the 'conditions governing the continuity or transmutation of structures' as well as the 'reproduction of social systems' (Giddens, 1986, pp. 18–23, 376). Scrupulously, this elucidation might not definitively settle all the dualism and dichotomy between structure and agency, nor deeply explore the degree to which heterogeneous agents change the social structure. Although structuration theory may, to that extent, underestimate the enduring constraints of specific structures, particularly in highly institutionalised political and economic contexts, the Giddensian comprehensive framework is dialectical and dynamic for an integrative understanding of social systems—specifically, the power systems involved.

3. Disagreements over Political Settlements

The political settlements framework emerges as an evolutionary methodology to combine power relations and institutions (Khan, 2010; Behuria et al., 2017). Our research argues that the power distribution among organisations constitutes the Giddensian structuration of power, on which institutional outcomes hinge. However, Khan and Kelsall disagree on several cardinal concepts in political settlements, particularly their perspectives on elite agreements and conflicts. To reinterpret an integrative political settlements approach with structuration theory, our interpretation of the disagreements unfolds here.

First, the relevance of elite agreements to the definition of political settlements ignites the disagreements. Khan (2018a, 2018b) considers political settlements as the distribution of organisational power that reproduces itself over time. Hereto, a settlement exists whenever the power distribution is reproducible, even if no formal or tacit elite agreement operates. If the institutions and structures distribute benefits well to organisations by relative power, a settlement is reproducible and operable. By contrast, Kelsall (2018a) argues that political settlements are, by nature, agreements—whether explicit or implicit—among the powerful elite organisations that delineate the rules of the political game and resource distribution. Kelsall critiques Khan's generalised definition which connives at enduring conflicts under the guise of 'settlement'—actually, an 'unsettlement' (Bell & Pospisil, 2017). Kelsall (2018a, pp. 658–660) clarifies how it detracts from conceptual clarity and everyday discourse. In a word

of clarified discourse, Kelsall notes that without agreements, the political settlements approach abandons its distinct analytical precision and becomes indistinguishable from general power studies (ibid., p. 662).

Apropos analytical approach, institutional outcomes are contingent on differential power structures, thus their reproducibility and efficacy vary with the underlying power distribution among organisations (Khan, 2018a, 2018b). Concerning Khan's consideration, the institutions and policy praxes appear as instruments that reflect and reinforce the power structures. Conversely, Kelsall (2018a, 2018b) contends that institutions themselves, settled through elite agreements, are crucial for the sustainable order of power systems. It is notable for Kelsall that Khan might underestimate the derivations of institutional outcomes to create an ordered settlement. Although Khan (2018b, p. 693) acknowledges the agency's effects on the power structure, the effects are considered indeterminate in policy praxes. To settle this indetermination, the agreements of elite agents, official or natural, that settle and are settled by institutions, might be visible to dissect (Kelsall, 2018b; Kelsall & Vom Hau, 2022). That is because elite agreements are an instrument for managing conflicts and nudging predictable rules towards the order backed by the visible power (agency) of elite organisations.

The second disagreement happens to the 'bottom line' of socio-political stability in conflict management. Khan (2018a) argues that the existence of conflicts is not exclusive to a settlement, insofar as the structured power distribution remains reproducible. In other words, the sufficient condition is no drastic shift in power structure. Kelsall (2018a) deems this condition problematic since existing conflicts undermine the very idea of a settlement. In this regard, political settlements occur in the interaction where the power structure is trapped in everlasting disruptive potential, which contradicts the bottom line of stability—a settling down or resolution (ibid., p. 660). For Kelsall, pragmatic settlements are those where conflicts are restrained through agreements that govern power and resource distribution. Nevertheless, Khan (2018b, pp. 671, 674) describes the revised approach as a planned order wherein elites, consciously and cooperatively, take collective action to coordinate the power distribution. That might be unsatisfactory—Khan (ibid., p. 672) regards the order of power systems as an outcome of the non-cooperative game in socio-political interaction rather than any collective plan. Accordingly, since coordinating cooperation both among and within elite

organisations is arduous, it is essential to move beyond agreements themselves and deeply investigate the socio-political interaction across the whole society.

Briefly, the cardinal disagreements interpreted consist of their perspectives on elite agreements and the bottom line about conflicts. Khan's interactive, structural approach contrasts with Kelsall's concern about the necessity of sustainable elite agreements to settle conflicts with the acceptable distribution of rules and resources. Further dissecting their perspectives, it is tangible that the disagreements, in essence, reflect a relative dualism in each research focus on political settlements, scrupulously to some degree at least.

Understanding the relative dualism is to understand their (dis)agreements and where an integrative reinterpretation roots. Khan's explanatory framework is systematic and cogent as it probes into the interaction and aspects of both structure and agency. It is compelling to probe the structure-agency duality—'organisations … exercise agency' (Khan, 2018a, p. 641), 'agency does indeed affect structure' (ibid., 2018b, p. 673), and the macro-level 'political settlement is the structure [that implicates institutional and socio-political outcomes]' (ibid., p. 694). However, this probe on duality can be more lucid as the texts might be vague to some degree, against which Kelsall argues for a universal political settlement concept. For instance, 'the effects [of agency] are not determinate enough in a policy-relevant sense' (ibid., p. 693), and 'what … agency can achieve is limited by the … flexibility in the structure of the political settlement' (ibid., 2018a, p. 641). The texts indicate a structure-agency duality there, yet not elucidated to analyse the micro-level derivations of settlements in methodology. Even so, Khan (2018a, pp. 641-643) elaborates on the process of socio-political interaction at the macro level: 1) regular incremental changes of holding power driven by organisations, and 2) occasional disruptive non-incremental ones. Following this evolutionary interactive process, it seems the distribution outcomes of economic resources that are visible variables and indicators rather than the derivations or process itself. If so, studying political settlements concisely implies studying historical evidence on the dialectical process between the macro-level distribution of organisational power and institutional changes.

Although Khan invokes that the incremental changes in political settlements are the outcome of agency interaction at the micro level, the convoluted effects of agency interaction on macro-level structure are vague. Khan (2018b, p. 692) interprets agency as that various

organisations are involved in the rent-seeking process to exercise their power to sustain or alter institutions. However, it might exacerbate the relative dualism if there seems to be no visible derivation and process representative of agency when the term 'structure' recurs. Therefore, with the idea that a settlement represents agency in human contexts, Kelsall (2018a, p. 660) delivers a micro-level perspective of elite agreements.

According to Kelsall (2018b, p. 4), explicit or implicit agreements among powerful groups constitute the rules of the political game—the organisation of power—at the micro level for micro-macro interlinkage, which is an unambiguous problem-solving approach. That is because Kelsall considers those organisations with disruptive capabilities to unsettle and overturn the reproduction of power systems as the primary agents in political settlements. Kelsall (2018a, 2018b) argues that the commonsense roots of political settlements count on agreements among conflicting elites based on everyday discourse. Besides, generalising its implications into peace and conflict studies can prevent the research scope of political settlements from narrowing (also see Kelsall & Vom Hau, 2022). Neglecting the importance of agreements in peace and conflict praxes weakens the explanatory power of political settlements, as elite agreements and institutions determine the flexibility and adaptability of power praxes. Remarkably, this elite-agreement settlements approach incorporates both cooperation and non-cooperative games between organisations, to some degree clarifying a set of visible indicators and variables for the convoluted micro-level agency interaction. Our interpretation commends this as a significant contribution, as it extends the methodology of international development into peace and conflict studies. Kelsall's methodology identifies powerful elites, constructing a micro-level foundation for analysing the order reproduction within power systems. However, limiting the methodology to elite agreements might also narrow the scope of political settlements and exacerbate the relative agency-focused dualism, which prompts our reinterpretation to engage structuration theory.

4. Political Settlements and Duality of Structure

Structuration theory enables meticulous scrutiny of the convoluted social interaction through the duality—structure and agency. This section herefrom investigates the duality within the

political settlements framework. Our investigation highlights the relevance of the duality to socio-political interaction between institutions and agents, offering a nuanced reinterpretation of power structure and agency.

With our understanding of the structuration process inherent in Khan's (2018a, pp. 641–642) definition, this research reinterprets that a political settlement implies the power systems with evolutionary dynamics towards an equilibrium of distribution; it is the evolution, rather than a presumed equilibrium, that counts (ibid.). The evolving distribution of power, along with certain formal and informal institutions, constitutes a reproducible order for a bottom line of socio-political stability. Throughout this reproduction, the power structure distributes benefits among organisations in accordance with their relative holding power (Khan, 2010; Kelsall, 2018a). However, this definition ignites a thought-provoking debate between Khan and Kelsall (see African Affairs Issue 469). To grasp and mediate the debate, our research argues that order reproduction in power systems entails both the reflexive actions of agents and the constraints imposed by the structural properties of institutions. By this logic, this research attempts to uncover the dialectical process in the order of power systems through an integrative structure-agency framework considering structuration theory. After the dissection and interpretation of the cardinal disagreements is our reinterpretation of the critical concepts and theoretical framework of the political settlements approach mediated by structuration theory.

Engaging structuration theory, the duality of structure and agency offers a dynamic reinterpretation of power structuration. Within the political settlements framework, there exists a power structure that is simultaneously regarded as both the outcome and the medium of socio-political actions. First, the reinterpretation of outcome is straightforward. As Giddens (1979, 1986) suggests, a structure is a set of structural properties in the form of resources and rules; thus, a power structure pertains to the rules and resources of the power game. A power game involves the rules of formal and informal institutions, with material and non-material resources including rents and agreements. Power organisations and individuals use these rules and resources for contests, and the agents reconstitute the structural properties in contests, which is reflected in the (in)formal institutions and distribution of organisational power. The power structure and structural properties are an outcome of contests where power agents

'accept the rents they receive' and acknowledge the distribution (Khan 2018a, p. 654). This structure transcends static equilibrium and features dynamic towards an equilibrium (ibid., p. 642). Moreover, the order of power systems is an 'outcome of interactions between [power agents]' (ibid., 2018b, p. 672), whose agency brings changes in the structural properties of institutions (ibid., 2018a, p. 644). Specifically, effective socio-political mobilisation enhances an organisation's holding power (Khan, 2010, 2018a, 2018b)—its capabilities to exert agency and affect the outcomes of contests. Our structure-agency framework reinterprets holding power as the evolutionary relative strength of organisations to hold out in contests over rules and resources. Mobilisation is the means through which organisations capture resources and rules; herein, the power structure is the outcome of agency mobilisation through contests, embedding the reproducible order into power systems. Hence, power accumulation is the structuration process where and when organisations exert agency to mobilise and gradually reconstitute the structural properties in power (re)distribution. To sum up, the power structure, together with the rules and resources distributed, is the evolving outcome reconstituted through agency mobilisation that nudges institutions.

No mobilisation occurs in a vacuum without conditions—this fact brings more clarity to our second reinterpretation. The actions of agents cause an outcome of new rules and resources, but no real-world action operates without the medium of given resources and rules—the agents interact in power contests by using the structural properties. Similarly, if the outcome is a redistribution of organisational power and benefits, the medium is the power structure in which mobilisation occurs. Mobilisation is not merely the means but also manifests an organisation's holding power. A power structure manifests the distribution of rules and resources at a time-space (Khan, 2018a), determining which organisations can mobilise at the given time-space and whether they can enforce their mobilisation effectively. The time-space distanciation reinterprets the medium of rules and resources used in the day-to-day power game as the social institutions given by long-term development. Since every time-space of mobilisation contains the long-term distanciation of different institutions, the structures distribute different costs and benefits among organisations (ibid., pp. 639–640), constraining how organisations translate agency into heterogeneous impacts on rules and resources. That is why Khan (ibid., p. 646) highlights specifying capabilities and relative

strength of organisations in research and practice. In short, the power structure portrays the relative strength across organisations according to the rules and resources mobilised within the power game (ibid., p. 646; 2018b, p. 689). Moreover, structural institutions contextualise the conditions for reproducing power systems, as 'the configuration of holding power … is buttressed by … formal and informal institutions that reproduce and sustain this configuration of power by enabling a consistent set of economic benefits to be created and allocated' (Khan, 2010, p. 22). In a nutshell, for time-space distanciation, the power structure, as the medium for agents, contextualises the conditions where and how organisations contest and mobilise.

Notably, structuration theory inevitably revises the concepts. For example, the theory argues that a structure itself has no agency, raising a debate about which agents—*who*—are responsible for reproduction. The structure is reproduced through agency by the praxes of agents. Apropos Khan's perspective, the organisational mobilisation in rent redistribution seems a structuration process; with respect to Kelsall's, elite agreements reflect structuration as well. Our research argues that both agreements and rents are the forms of the power structuration process; the essence seems indeed the agency-structure interaction in power distribution. The mobilisation for rent-seeking or agreements is the action of agents with imperfect knowledge, thus constituting the intended or unintended redistribution of resources and rules. In a word, power systems are reproduced through interaction, when agreements and rents are crucial means and forms for system reproduction. That is, by mobilising the existing rules and resources, power agents translate their agency into influence over the power structure in the form of rents and agreements.

For this process of structuration, our research argues for the time-space distanciation. Khan notes that power distribution is closely relevant to the historical interaction of socio-political mobilisation. Historically, organisations accumulate power through continuous mobilisation, forming a power structure that affects subsequent mobilisations—the concept of time-space distanciation articulates this historical dynamics in a coherent and perspicuous manner (Giddens, 1986). Social interaction, including but not limited to power contests, is not confined to the specific but extends across time-space. The accumulation, continuity, and distanciation in the process render a critical perspective on the duality of power structure: a power structure is not created immediately but (re)produced in the long-term development of

socio-political interaction as conflicts. The power distribution, organisational mobilisation, and institutional evolution are all manifestations of this historical process—the existing power structure is the outcome of past interaction among power agents, constituting the conditions and contexts for future actions. For Khan, a political settlement implies a reproducible power structure. Our time-space distanciation suggests that the impact of power structure extends across time-space, continuing throughout the historical process. Even in current conflicts, the power structure established previously can sustain the settlements. Furthermore, Kelsall's elite agreements are not merely current political consensus; the impact of elite cooperation can also extend through history. Despite being renegotiated over time, the agreements render enduring power relations across time-space by forming the structure within which future power contests happen. Therefore, studying the dynamics of time-space distanciation would settle why past settlements continue to affect the present power structure and for future political actions.

Besides, our reinterpretation pinpoints the structural properties as those (in)formal institutions. The institutions are a manifestation of structure through temporal and spatial continuity, continuously reproduced through the structuration process that is concrete in praxis—whereas the structure itself remains abstract. Hereto, institutions are seen as a set of properties within the concept of structuration. This research interprets legal and political institutions of state as the medium supplying formal rules and resources for individual and collective actions within the power game. Meanwhile, social norms, such as customs, beliefs, and values, constitute those governing the daily praxes of agents, interlinked to formal ones. Concerning agency, self-interest and reciprocity are embedded in interactive praxes; in social and power relations, self-interest and reciprocity interact and transcend the dichotomy or dualism of egoism and altruism. As Kelsall (see the comment on Khan, 2018b) concludes, there are both cooperative and non-cooperative actions among power agents. Considering Khan's (2018a, 2018b) arguments, this research suggests that the compatibility of cooperative and non-cooperative games manifests the complexity of social interaction beyond egoism and altruism. However, the complex social interaction is not agnostic, but observable through specific variables and indicators with the derivations of settlements investigated. In addition to elite agreements, the manifestations of power distribution include rent-seeking and

ideology, while the power agents imply the variables of political leaders, parties, factions, governments, NGOs, as well as business and industrial organisations. Concisely, the complex (non-)cooperative interaction among power agents results in evolving political settlements and is visible through well-selected variables and indicators.

In summary, based on our reinterpretation, an integrative framework mediates the disagreements, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamic political settlements. The structure-agency interaction integrates with political settlements: institutions and policy praxes are re-created and re-utilised within the structuration, with actions embedded in the time-space distanciation. The structures and institutions of power constrain the (re)production of power systems and organisational agency, yet the agency simultaneously reconstitutes the structure.

5. Reinterpreted Political Settlements in Republic of China 1912–1928

Khan articulates that the sinews of political settlements are the stability and sustainability of power distribution. Even with violent conflicts, as long as a settlement holds power and institutions together to reproduce itself, it is considered sustainable and stable. However, Kelsall argues that this reproduction perspective renders the political settlements approach doctrinaire and detached from conflict-ending agency in everyday discourse. For instance, a disagreement occurs over the case of Afghanistan (Kelsall, 2018a; Khan, 2018b). One ratiocination infers that, due to the insufficiency of cooperative agreements, subversive power agents are always to overturn the established power structure. When always being overturned, Afghanistan featured a stalemate. Yet, concerning the other ratiocination that settlements themselves are an outcome of non-cooperative interaction, it is configurable to nudge a sustainable settlement against a stalemate. To mediate the stalemate-settlement disagreement, this section examines historical evidence from the Republic of China during the Peiyang (Beiyang) warlord era, illustrating the explanatory power of our duality-oriented political settlements framework in research.

Our evidence represents a scattered power structure and the agency of subversive mobilisation in a context where a population of over 426 million suffered from turbulence. Since the centralised authority of the Qing dynasty's monarchy collapsed, the Peiyang

Republic of China, as Roberts (1989) concludes, endured belligerent warlords and dispersed power. After successive nationalist and democratic revolutions, even though the strongman Yüan Shih-k'ai (Yuan Shikai) took over the nascent state power with his Peiyang Army in 1912, Yüan's conservative rule failed to nudge an explicit, formal set of institutions as a sustainable settlement. Yüan's failure and sudden death further scattered state power and triggered the surging warlordism after 1916—various factions within and beyond the Peiyang Army engaged in power redistribution through military violence over a decade era. This era was a verisimilar stalemate, inheriting the power structure from the Qing's finale and Yüan's rule.

Specifically and historically, from 1916 to 1919, the Anhui clique Tuan Ch'i-jui (Duan Qirui) dominated the Peiyang regime under the manipulation of Imperial Japan, advocating the reunification of China through military violence (Ch'en, 1968; Lai, 2000/2019, pp. 571, 633). In opposition, the Zhili (Hebei) clique Feng Kuo-chang (Feng Guozhang) proposed a compromising negotiation backed by Anglo-American powers (Lai, 2000/2019, pp. 51, 583–588, 633; Li, 2021)—interestingly, this compromise exacerbated violent conflicts with Tuan's Anhui clique. Meanwhile, the Fengtian (Liaoning) clique Chang Tso-lin (Zhang Zuolin) consolidated regional control in Northeast China (Lai, 2000/2019, pp. 625–626). After 1919, Ts'ao K'un (Cao Kun) succeeded Feng's leadership and his conflicts with Tuan (ibid., p. 632). In 1920, Ts'ao's Zhili clique and Chang's Fengtian clique forged a military alliance, allying with horizontal factions such as Yunnan warlords, and defeated Tuan's Anhui clique in civil wars (ibid., pp. 634–635, 645). However, the alliance was short-lived and unsustainable—the Zhili-Fengtian coalition government promptly collapsed (ibid., pp. 657–666). By 1922, the Zhili clique, incited by Anglo-American powers, declared wars on Japan-backed Chang and his Fengtian clique but were defeated in 1924 (ibid., pp. 723–730, 859). This defeat was due to the Beijing Coup conducted by Feng Yü-hsiang (Feng Yuxiang) at a critical moment of the Zhili-Fengtian wars, with support from Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan), the Soviet Union, and Japan to topple the Ts'ao authority (Sheridan, 1966, pp. 139–145; Lai, 2000/2019, 853–857). In 1925, Feng opposed the Fengtian regime but failed. Despite that, after the Beijing Coup, Feng shifted from a Zhili subordinate to a horizontal opposition—Sun's Kuomintang (Nationalist Party). Eventually, Kuomintang overturned the

Peiyang regime gradually with Soviet assistance by 1928 (ibid., pp. 1099–1125; Zarrow, 2005, pp. 242–247). The era of warlordism and regime change is a case for understanding the duality of the scattered power structure and belligerent warlord agency in Peiyang China.

The era of the Republic of China from 1912 to 1928 offers a representative case for studying the evolutionary structuration process of political settlements embedded in evolving power distribution, warlordism, and turbulent regime change (Bloch, 1938; Waldron, 1991). Similar to Afghanistan, it is a case where elite organisations attempted to subvert the existing power distribution, yet the structure remained reproducible. After the power ruptures of the sundered Qing, Yüan established a short-lived authoritarian settlement with his modernised Peiyang Army (MacKinnon, 1973; Lai, 2000/2019, pp. 148–157), ostensibly symbolising the end of China's imperial monarchy and the republic's nascence. However, Yüan attempted to resurrect the monarchy, crowning himself as president-emperor, which infuriated malcontents in horizontal opposition and vertical subordinate factions (MacKinnon, 1973, pp. 405–413; Zarrow, 2005, pp. 87–89). Yüan's regime became fragile, and China's state power dispersed into horizontal and vertical factions. With Yüan's death in 1916 thoroughly sundering the authority, the violence-based authoritarian settlement was no longer maintained. Those malcontented elites barefacedly transformed into warlords in the nascent republic (Young, 1983; De Ven, 1997). Warlords were the elite organisations held up by both traditional gentry knowledge and modernised military violence (Ch'en, 1979), incessantly redistributing power in military conflicts and alliances (Ch'en, 1968; Marten, 2007; McCord, 2022). The conflicts of warlordism appeared to signify a stalemate, where non-cooperative disagreements of belligerent factions took precedence over conflict-ending settlements (Outram, 1997). Nonetheless, whereas warlords nudged regional fragmentation and unsettlement, the power structure reproduced itself as violent reconfiguration and structuration of institutions (Ch'i, 1976; Lary, 1980; McCord, 1996; Bell & Pospisil, 2017). Hence, for the Peiyang China era, the interaction between the warlord agency and the power structure represents a case to test the explanatory power of our duality-oriented framework.

The political settlements were subject to power relations of warlord agency in military conflicts and alliances, which also reflected the existing and evolving macro structures where the unsettled power redistribution and structuration of institutions occurred. First, since the

power structure serves as the medium for the reproduction of power systems, the primary investigation is given to the established structure of political settlements. Yüan's regime rose by leveraging the scattered power structure deriving from the collapse of central authority in the late Qing and the regional warlordism it fostered. At the finale of the Qing, the central monarchic authority, with an attempt to suppress revolutions and perpetuate fiscal-political stability, acquiesced in regional autonomy of tax revenues and local armies (Ch'i, 1976; Li, 2020, p. 258). Although this acquiescence temporarily stabilised the political situation, it triggered an inexorable dispersal of power, with local elites organising financial and military resources autonomously. For example, Yüan emerged as a strongman of the republic, whose control over the most subversive military strength—the Peiyang Army—enabled Yüan to accumulate fiscal and political power smoothly. However, Yüan's authoritarian agency failed to settle the scattered power structure. The visible power relations manifested in the internal conflicts between vertical subordinates, Tuan and Feng, and the horizontal opposition among external factions (Young, 1983; Zarrow, 2005). Yüan, compromising on *the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China*, concluded numerous formal and informal agreements with horizontal factions like Sun. The agreements around the constitution were to consolidate his rule via conflict-ending cooperation. Yet, behind these ostensible agreements lay non-cooperative manoeuvring, one result of which was Yüan's compacting of *the Provisional Constitution* and resurrection of monarchy (Nathan, 1983; Lai, 2000/2019). Predictably, Yüan's non-cooperation failed to realise his ambition of crowning himself president-emperor, precipitating violent conflicts among horizontal and vertical factions. One derivation was that Yüan's agency contravened the power structure, contradicting the power relations. For that established structure, regional elites dominated politics through the autonomy of military and financial power (Mackinnon, 1973; Zarrow, 2005, pp. 75–79; Li, 2020); although Yüan's authoritarian settlement maintained his strongman regime, according to Khan's political settlements framework, institutional arrangements that deviate from power relations are inherently fragile. The deviation introduced the power system reproduction by the agency with the medium of the established scattered structure, wherein a process in which the power system was reproduced by the agency; power agents, Yüan and other warlords, continuously redistributed power and adjusted institutions through mobilisation and violent politics of the

following decade (Ch'i, 1976; Li, 2020; McCord, 2022). By this logic, Yüan's evanescent settlement was not only the outcome of factional power distribution, but also a dynamic evolution where the power structure was utilised and reconstituted during the nascent Peiyang China era.

The institutional evolution, illustrated by *the Provisional Constitution*, established an ostensibly legitimate constitutional medium by rules of agreements and laws. However, the impact of warlordism immeasurably constrained and undermined the rules and institutions (Nathan, 1983, pp. 263–265; Young, 1983, pp. 226–232; Li, 2020). The power of warlords was never distributed by the formal agreements and constitution; instead, they exploited the non-constitutional rules and resources as their medium in contests to perpetuate the power system reproduction for their own gains. For instance, Yüan compacted the constitution; Tuan and others leveraged the provisions of *the Provisional Constitution* to arbitrarily legitimise their political manoeuvring under the guise of the constitutional medium, actually overriding parliamentary seats by seemingly legitimate rules (Lai, 2000/2018, pp. 547–555). In practice, institutions became an arena and one seeming medium for the agency of warlords, but the source of their power, the essential medium, was their military violence. Both structures and institutions were never static in power distribution but continuously evolved along the power dynamics with belligerent warlord agency of subversive mobilisation.

The second to examine is agency. The scattered structure in Peiyang China reflected dispersed military and fiscal power, which was exploited and evolved by the warlord agency. With the medium of fiscal and military power, the rents and agreements conceptualised by Khan and Kelsall are unambiguous compatible manifestations of our political settlements. For example, the Peiyang Army's previously subordinate factions transformed into warlord cliques who contested regional control through military violence and political manoeuvring. The warlords, such as Tuan of Anhui clique, Feng of Zhili clique, and Chang of Fengtian clique, leveraged their fiscal-military resources to (dis)agree on settlements—sustainable or short-lived (Young, 1983; McCord, 2022). The settlements pertained to rent-seeking and agreement negotiation on conflict cessation and benefit distribution among warlords and the imperialist great powers backed (Lai, 2000/2019), which manifested the agency in power and resource contests. Their military and political praxes engaged with the rules and resources of

the structure that was being evolved and reconstituted. In short, the engagement brought the agency into the structuration process, reproducing the structures and settlements with the available ones as a medium. Accordingly, the engagement of the scattered power structure in redistribution praxes aligns with the concept of agency within our framework.

Third, the reconstituted structure evolving in agency praxes implies not only the conflict-ending agreements of power and resource distribution analysed by Kelsall, but also the evolutionary interactive order of power systems scrutinised by Khan. Exercising their agency in the power contests, warlords relied on military violence and political manoeuvring, essentially the interaction between or within warlord organisations over the distribution of benefits. Warlords such as Tuan and Feng solidified their rule in their respective territories and extended their impact through political-military alliances and diplomatic relations with great powers (Lai, 2000/2019; Li, 2020, pp. 272–276; McCord, 2022, p. 37). This interaction of (dis)agreements or acquiescence involved both unconcealed conflicts and tacit negotiations. Given the diversity and quantity of organised warlords in Peiyang China, no single formal agreement settled all definitively. Nevertheless, the complex interaction and numerous (un)sustainable agreements constituted broader settlements and institutional outcomes at a macro level, intentionally or unintentionally.

For instance, regarding the structure of power dispersal, our research suggests that its derivations were embedded in the agency and the fragile agreements among warlords. The warlords condemned warlordism itself, as their subversive mobilisation and agency were aimed at unifying China against regional fragmentation (Lai, 2000/2019). While seeking power and social allegiance through military violence and political manoeuvring, most warlords portrayed themselves as legitimate nationalist heroes; ironically, their intentional actions fuelled the ostensibly unintentional fragmentation they seemingly disagreed with. Next, the subsequent structure of power configuration is intelligible—as most warlords mobilised agency to unify China, at least ostensibly, the praxes driven by their demands of maximising power and benefits nudged the structuration and reconstitution of political settlements. Thus, our research resonates with McCord (1996)—warlords simultaneously perpetuated and distanced themselves from the political settlements that made them powerful. The warlord agency, within the structuration process, facilitated a temporary continuity of

power dispersal while laying the groundwork for dynamic institutional changes towards settled configuration, revealing the agency-structure dynamics of political settlements.

Within our duality-oriented political settlements framework, the preceding three-step investigation examines the structuration process of power distribution in the Republic of China 1912–1928. The examination uncovers the role of warlords in institutional changes, who manoeuvred military conflicts and alliances within the interaction of (non-)cooperative games. The changes correlated to the duality, whereby the warlord agency was constrained by the established power structure and simultaneously reconstituted it. Political settlements are not static but rather reproduced by power agents, as reflected in the evolving order of power systems. Even in turbulent contexts exist macro-level settlements, which our research identifies as fragile settlements, sometimes termed 'unsettlement' (Bell & Pospisil, 2017). Ultimately, the history of Peiyang China illustrates the dynamic structure-agency interaction, demonstrating the evolving nature of the reproducible political settlements.

6. Discussion & Conclusions

This research employs structuration theory to reinterpret the political settlements framework with the duality of structure, whereby the power structure constrains power agents and is reconstituted by their actions. Hence, the structure of political settlements is the medium and outcome of the structure-agency interaction in contests. The settlements reveal the evolving power distribution and institutions reproduced in three steps: 1) identifying the established power structure as an intermediary within historical contexts; 2) examining the actions power agents exercise agency within the structure; 3) scrutinising the outcome of the (un)intended power structure nudged by praxes. The Republic of China case 1912–1928 demonstrates how and why the actions of warlords, as power agents, (re)constituted and reflected the structure of settlements. Though warlords intended to create unity and order, they triggered instability and fragmentation, institutionalising military violence within the power structure in Peiyang China (Roberts, 1989). Our framework enables an eclectic and pragmatic examination to investigate the unintended inequality and conflicts in the South, strengthening the research utility on the dynamics of institutional evolution and power (re)distribution with clarified

concepts and variables.

The duality-oriented political settlements framework develops pragmatic explanatory power in interpreting the historical evidence of organisational agency, power redistribution, and the structuration of institutional changes. This framework integrates the perspectives of Khan and Kelsall, recognising that political settlements involve the contexts and conditions for the reproduction of power systems, affected by the praxes of agents. The interaction within agents and between agents and the structure of political settlements is crucial; the settlements are not a static situation of power distribution, but continuously reproduced in interaction. For example, the warlords evolved political settlements by manipulating and distorting fragile forms of institutions along their actions or not. Our framework articulates the dual role of institutions in power contests, offering a perspective from the historical development of political settlements as well as the derivations and resolutions of conflicts. Herefrom, it pinpoints settlements as both the product of power structure and an intermediary by which organisations adjust and consolidate their holding power in non-cooperative and cooperative games.

Khan's work is instrumental in structuring our understanding of power distribution and its effects on institutional outcomes. The insights on the power structure and complex agency, more than elite agreements, establish a systematic interpretation of power systems. Further, our research reinterprets the political settlements framework inspired by structuration theory to clarify the critical concepts and variables. It argues for the perspicuous articulation of the structure-agency duality in evolutionary settlements towards a nuanced reinterpretation. The reinterpretation not only enriches academic discourse but generates a pragmatic approach capable of informing real-world policy reflection in development and conflict studies.

When scrutinising the insights, it is essential to contextualise the agency perspective by acknowledging their professional backgrounds, schools, and identities. Kelsall, an eminent international development practitioner and conflict resolution expert, brings a pragmatic and problem-solving approach to political settlements. The insights on elite agreements reflect Kelsall's agency and knowledge of post-conflict societies, where peace is agreed on through delicate negotiations among elites. This agreement approach grasps real-world socio-political interaction, conducive to sustainable governance in fragile states for policymakers. However,

one might argue that this approach might overshadow the broader structuration process and structure highlighted by Khan. Still and all, if an investigation starts with agency praxis according to Kelsall's perspective, then the institutionalised structures such as education, culture, and ideology can appropriately complement the gaps between the agreements and complex interaction as Kelsall's approach and its variables and indicators are indispensable in bridging theory and practice.

Our research extends the debate between Kelsall and Khan, primarily distinguishing the macro-structure and micro-agency. Following our reinterpretation, future research can engage specific theoretical perspectives and scrutinise them deeply. For instance, whether the essence of agreements or rents merely pertains to material but not culture? Following Max Weber's cultural studies and Cummings' (2024) scrutiny of cultural political economy, with which mechanisms cultural properties such as ideology (Behuria et al., 2017; Gray, 2018) form the power structuration process and to what degree? Beyond the material-culture debate, there are more theoretical ones not limited to conflict-harmony, necessity-contingency, and motivation-fact. For example, Khan and Kelsall seem more focused on conflicts, which aligns with the conflict-structure logic inherited from Karl Marx and Michel Foucault. From dialectical materialism, Marx argues that the contradiction drives historical development, with class conflicts in capitalist society (settlements) being inevitable; Foucault considers conflicts within power relations inherent in power mechanisms, thus the relational power relies on rules and discipline. However, referencing Talcott Parsons, one might argue whether the essence of political settlements concerns an aspect of harmony? Are settlements necessary or contingent? Our framework calls for more extension across diverse theoretical contexts.

Although the case demonstrates the explanatory power of our framework, this research might not fully explore the broader role of social movements or non-elite agents. Our reinterpretation aligns with Khan's 'interactive order', recognising the complexity of the interactive agency. Meanwhile, it follows Kelsall's ideas by focusing on the case of warlords, as the elite agency is intelligible and visible in praxis. Consequently, the research primarily selects representative warlords, and proves effective in interpreting historical evidence of conflicts, yet requires an extension to apply to different socio-political contexts, particularly where institutionalised structures are deeply entrenched. Additionally, spotlighting the agency

of conflicts to redistribute power may risk underestimating the role of historical institutions in contexts where political stability derives more from more gradual, relatively harmonious institutional evolution. The sustainable stability in certain political settlements that are not frequently renegotiated might limit the explanatory power in the long-term investigation. Nevertheless, our considerations never contradict that the duality-oriented framework can indeed be used to analyse the role of broader agents in institutional changes. Our approach offers a framework to study non-elite movements, with more empirical research called to test whether and how this framework can transcend previous dualism.

Our research calls for more extensive empirical studies of power contests. For instance, concerning political settlements of gender (O'Rourke, 2017), power systems of family, labour, education, religion, and government never merely reflect a static structure. Instead, institutions are reproduced through the actions of gender agents. The agents, while constrained by existing power relations of gender, possess the capabilities to challenge the structure, but the unintended consequences of agency caution. Examining historical evidence from the patriarchal structure and the absence of female elites can uncover the embedded informal institutions of gender within power systems. Applying the duality-oriented political settlements framework can analyse the power (re)distribution wherein gender agents conflict or negotiate—even subverting the norms through violent means. Highlighting the continually renegotiated power structure, systemic order, and settlements renders optimism for feminist settlements. Furthermore, this framework is appropriate for other marginalised areas, such as the political economy of environmental justice or indigenous rights. Since the duality delivers a lens to see the agency's effects of the marginalised on institutional changes, the political settlements approach with structuration theory offers a decolonised reinterpretation of power (re)distribution and institutions across marginalised spheres.

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