



Understanding the trust deficit in China: Mapping positive experience and trust in strangers



Jingjing Yao^a, Zhi-Xue Zhang^{b,*}, Jeanne Brett^c, J. Keith Murnighan^c

^a ISEEG School of Management, France

^b Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, China

^c Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The observation that in China people generally do not trust strangers motivated us to study this phenomenon. We used the literature of guanxi to define strangers, and we drew on intergroup contact theory to hypothesize that positive experiences with outgroup, but not with ingroup members will increase trust in strangers. In three experiments we found that perceiving support from (Study 1), receiving help from (Study 2), and being trusted by (Study 3) outgroup members led to higher trust in strangers. Indirect reciprocity mediated this relationship, suggesting that people generalize experiences with one outgroup member to other social actors, and in turn, increase their trust in strangers. Study 4 showed that intrapersonal trust increased after a positive outgroup experience. Study 5 replicated this finding using secondary field data. This research contributes to the trust literature by showing how specific and eventful experiences increase trust in strangers.

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1. Introduction

China's remarkable economic growth has attracted considerable scholarly interest in Chinese firms and entrepreneurs, but less effort has been made to understand how social interactions play a role in Chinese socioeconomic development. Research suggests that trust acts as a key facilitator of economic growth (Knack & Keefer, 1997), civil engagement (Uslaner & Brown, 2005), organizational dynamics (Dirks, 1999), team cooperation (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011), and interpersonal relationships (De Cremer & Tyler, 2007). Unfortunately, Chinese people tend to have very low trust in strangers. Fukuyama (1995) classified China as a low-trust society: "the pervasive distrust of strangers ... existed in Chinese society well before the postwar industrialization" (p. 65), "there is a relatively low degree of trust in Chinese society the moment one steps outside the family circle" (p. 95). A recent, large-scale social survey reported that less than 30 percent of Chinese are willing to trust strangers (Wang & Yang, 2013). Because the fast-paced global marketplace is likely to create an increasing number of international interactions between Chinese and people

they classify as strangers, this lack of trust may be a major obstacle to China's continuing international economic development (Hardin, 2001). This research proposes and tests ways to address the trust deficit in strangers in China.

Who are strangers in Chinese society? We answer this question by referring to the emic Chinese construct guanxi. Guanxi is generally conceptualized as an informal personal relationship between two individuals who are linked by social norms that govern the exchange of favors, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation (Chen & Chen, 2004; Hwang, 1987). Chinese people commonly use guanxi to categorize others into three types of relationships: family, familiar, and stranger (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013; Yang, 1993). Strangers are fundamentally different from family and familiars because Chinese people have relationships with families and familiars, ranging from intimate to superficial, but they do not have relationships with strangers. In this sense, strangers are people with whom one does not perceive any relationship in a given situation. Unlike Westerners who usually employ abstract categories (e.g., gender, race, generation) to categorize others, Chinese use the personalized relationships and common affiliations that underlie guanxi to categorize people into family, familiar, and stranger groups.

Trust is a psychological state involving confident positive expectations about the benevolence of others (De Jong & Elfring, 2010; McAllister, 1995). Trust in strangers refers to a focal person's

* Corresponding author at: Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China.

E-mail addresses: j.yao@ieseg.fr (J. Yao), zxzhang@gsm.pku.edu.cn (Z.-X. Zhang), jmbrett@kellogg.northwestern.edu (J. Brett).

overall expectation of the benevolence of others with whom the focal person has no *guanxi* relationship. As there are many types of trust, it is important to note that our conceptualization of trust in strangers is based on interpersonal rather than institutional trust. Interpersonal trust refers to trust in other individuals; it is the assumption that other individuals will be benevolent. In contrast, institutional trust refers to trust in organizations and systems (e.g., governments, courts, school systems). Although conceptually distinct (e.g., Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Rao, Pearce, & Xin, 2005; Zucker, 1986), these two types of trust may interact such that confidence in institutions may enhance perceived security in the society and spill over into interpersonal trust (Steinhardt, 2012). Our focus trust in strangers, however, is grounded in the conceptualization of interpersonal, not institutional trust.

Our conceptualization of trust in strangers is also closer to the definition of generalized trust than that of particularistic trust. Particularistic trust refers to trust in a specific social actor based on information about that actor's background, reputation, or goodwill. For example, particularistic trust could be category-based, trusting people according to their membership in a social category (Brewer, 1981). In contrast, generalized trust refers to a belief in the overall benevolence of human nature (e.g., Mewes, 2014; Stolle, 2002). Generalized trust, by definition, naturally extends to strangers (Holm & Danielson, 2005), while particularistic trust does not.

This research investigates reasons for and proposes a possible solution to Chinese people's trust deficit in strangers. By proposing that people's trust in strangers can be increased, we take a different perspective from that trust in strangers is a fixed individual trait (e.g., Rotter, 1967). Rather we take the perspective that trust in strangers is variable depending on people's experiences and situations they find themselves in (e.g., Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Our perspective is consistent with recent research reporting that generalized trust increased following interpersonal experiences with people in foreign countries (Cao, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2014), and that environmental change influenced people's understanding of their *guanxi* relationships (Kiong & Kee, 1998). Thus, we propose that in China and elsewhere where trust in strangers is low, trust in strangers is nevertheless malleable depending on the experiences and situations people find themselves in. Specifically, we propose that positive interpersonal experiences can increase trust in strangers.

Our research makes several contributions. First, across five studies we show that positive experiences with outgroup members can boost people's trust in strangers. These results contribute to the literature documenting how and when personal social experiences can increase trust in strangers. Second, our research reveals that upstream indirect reciprocity acts as the mediating role to explain how social dynamics shapes Chinese people's trust in strangers. Unlike direct reciprocity exchanged between the same two individuals, indirect reciprocity involves at least three different individuals. For example, I help you and somebody else helps me, or I help you and you help somebody else. Finally, our studies suggest that the Chinese people's lack of trust in strangers does not have to be a major obstacle to China's continuing international economic development, because their trust in strangers can increase in response to short-term positive social interaction and indirect reciprocity.

2. Differential modes of association in China

Why do Chinese people have very low trust in strangers? Some scholars suggest that this tendency is related to the fact that their everyday social interaction occurs primarily with relatives and kin but not with strangers. Such interaction pattern leads to well defined boundaries between ingroups and outgroups (Huff &

Kelley, 2003). Weber (1951) observed that trust in China is heavily dependent on relatives and kinship and that Chinese people rarely trust outgroup members. According to Weber (1951), trust is rooted in the "community of blood" and rests upon "purely personal, familial, or semi-familial relationships". Similarly, in addressing why Chinese people find it so difficult to trust outsiders, Fukuyama (1995) noted that "the strength of the family bond implies a certain weakness in ties between individuals not related to one another: there is a relatively low degree of trust in Chinese society the moment one steps outside the family circle (p. 56)." Both Weber (1951) and Fukuyama (1995) highlighted the salient boundary between families and strangers, between people in ingroups and people in outgroups.

Much research shows that people commonly place more trust in members of their ingroups than members of their outgroups (Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009; Kramer, 1999). People interact frequently with ingroup members, and these interactions typically lead to positive, mutually reciprocal experiences (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). In contrast, people tend to interact less frequently with outgroup members, meaning they have less opportunity for positive social interaction with outgroup members, and so fewer opportunities to learn to trust outgroup members. To interact with outgroup members, people must overcome suspicion, uncertainty, and other interpersonal obstacles (Weber, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2004).

All this research on trust of members of ingroups and outgroups, and the observations of Weber and Fukuyama (1995) that Chinese people have infrequent positive social interactions with outgroup members and so do not trust them, suggest that it may be hard to overcome the low trust in strangers deficit in China. However, Fei's (1992) conceptualization *differential modes of association* suggests a more nuanced understanding of social relationships in China than Huff and Kelley's (2003) stark categorization of family as ingroup and strangers as outgroups. Fei (1992) describes Chinese people as standing at the center of their own interrelated, oscillating, and ultimately declining circles of social influence and social relationships. Using a metaphor, Fei (1992: 61) described differential modes of association to be "like the ripples formed from a rock thrown into a lake, each circle spreading out from the center becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant." Although Fei's metaphor implies that proximity, emotional closeness, and general feelings of trustworthiness decline as social circles extend outward away from the focal person, the metaphor also implies that circles expand dynamically. This characteristic of differential modes of association is called elasticity and it implies that the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups are not immutable in Chinese society, but instead are relative and situational. For example, a villager can be regarded as an ingroup member relative to a non-villager, but an outgroup member relative to a family member. If boundaries between ingroups and outgroups in Chinese society are under some circumstances mutable, when Chinese do have positive experiences with outgroup members they may be able to overcome the trust in strangers deficit.

3. Positive experiences

Intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) proposes that people's attitudes and behaviors toward outgroups are not categorically static, and that important events such as intergroup contact provide the basis for change. Extending intergroup contact theory, we suggest that positive experiences with outgroup members will increase trust in strangers. Intergroup contact theory provides several reasons why.

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