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Social trust and grassroots governance in rural China

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between social trust and governance has been one of the focal points of the academic and policy-making communities. Empirical studies on this relationship, however, have focused mostly on democracies. The scarcity of such studies in authoritarian countries has left many important questions unanswered: Is social trust associated with effective governance only in democratic settings? Can social trust improve the quality of governance in non-democracies as well? Drawing on data from 2005 China General Social Survey—a representative survey conducted nationwide at both the individual- and village-level in rural China, this paper attempts to answer these questions empirically by examining the relationship between social trust and the quality of governance in rural China. The findings reveal that different types of social trust—particularized trust and generalized trust—correspond with different effects in rural governance: whereas villagers' trust in people whom they knew personally was positively and significantly associated with the provision of various public goods and services, their trust in strangers had virtually no impact on rural governance.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the late 1950s and particularly after the rise of social capital studies, the relationship between social trust and grassroots governance has attracted enormous attention from both the academic and policy-making communities. A large part of the literature suggests that social trust, as the “lubricant of society,” is indispensable for effective democratic governance at various levels.¹ Subsequent empirical studies further confirm that in democratic countries, higher levels of social trust usually come in tandem with more active government and more cooperative communities, which in turn lead to better performance of grassroots governance.²

However, in contrast to the consensus achieved in democratic settings, researchers are less certain about the relationship between social trust and governance in authoritarian countries, and different, if not contradictory, findings have been reported. Many scholars, following Dahl's proposition that “mutual trust favors polyarchy... while extreme distrust favors

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¹ See, for example, Edward C. Banfield, *Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); Ronald Inglehart, “The Renaissance of Political Culture,” *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 4 (1988): 1203–30; Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Partha Dasgupta, and Ismail Serageldin, ed., *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2000).

² Eric M. Uslaner, “Democracy and Social Capital,” in *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark E. Warren (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Stephen Knack, “Social Capital and the Quality of Government: Evidence from the States,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2002): 772–85; Anirudh Krishna, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002); Michael Woolcock, “The Rise and Routinization of Social Capital, 1988–2008,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 469–87.

hegemony,” have argued that social trust is intrinsically democratic, and thus the relationship between social trust and the authoritarian system of governance is *conflictual*.³ Another group of scholars, however, have stated that the relationship between social trust and non-democratic systems of governance is not necessarily conflictual, but can also be *complementary*.⁴ Laitin, for example, has suggested that to argue social trust is intrinsically democratic runs the risk of conflating “democracy” with “effective institutions,” and it could be well the case that social trust “is more important for effective communist institutions than democratic ones.”⁵

Apart from the context of varying regimes, the relationship between social trust and governance is further confounded by the multi-dimensionality of social trust. Increasingly, scholars have found that the use of the term *social trust* depends on the identities of participants in the trust relationship, and individuals tend to place different levels of trust in people of different relational categories.⁶ Different forms of social trust apparently correspond with different effects in governance.⁷

Unfortunately, until now few empirical studies have directly tested the relationship between the different forms of social trust and grassroots governance in authoritarian settings.⁸ The scarcity of such studies has left several important questions unanswered: Is social trust associated with effective grassroots governance only in democratic settings? Can social trust improve the quality of governance in non-democracies as well? If so, how do different kinds of social trust affect grassroots governance? Based on data from a representative survey conducted in rural China (see [Appendix A](#)), this study attempts to answer these questions empirically by examining the relationship between social trust and the local provision of public goods in rural China.

For at least two reasons, contemporary rural China can serve as a critical case. The first reason is that the aforementioned debates are particularly acute in the Chinese contexts. On the one hand, many scholars have argued that social distrust, either derived from China’s traditional culture or caused by Mao’s totalitarian rule, is pervasive in China, and this pervasive distrust makes Communist Party’s (CCP) non-democratic governance possible and sustainable.⁹ On the other hand, studies based on cross-national surveys, such as the East Asia Barometer and the World Value Survey, have suggested that China is one of the most trusting societies in the world,¹⁰ and this large reservoir of social trust is one of the reasons that governance by the CCP is resilient and effective.¹¹ Unfortunately, until now there have been virtually no empirical studies that have directly tested these contradictory views. Some scholars have even excluded China as the “China outlier” from analysis.¹² Second, with regard to local governance, China has undergone rapid changes and uneven development for the past three decades. Such changes and development provide an ideal opportunity to examine the impacts of various factors on rural governance. Although many researchers have examined such factors as village elections and levels of economic development on grassroots governance,¹³ few have incorporated social trust to explain the variations in China’s rural governance. With an awareness of these factors, this study can significantly advance our understanding of the relationship between social trust and grassroots governance in non-democratic societies.

In the following parts of this paper, we introduce the unique sociopolitical environment of rural governance in China, operationalize the concept of social trust in the Chinese setting, gauge the reservoir of social trust, and explore the effects of social trust on the public goods and services provided by village governments. We then conclude with a discussion on the theoretical and political implications of the findings from this study.

³ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 151.

⁴ Charles Tilly, *Trust and Rule* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Susan H. Whiting, “The Mobilization of Private Investment as a Problem of Trust in Local Governance Structure,” In *Trust and Governance*, edited by Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 1998); Martin King Whyte, “The Social Roots of China’s Economic Development,” *China Quarterly*, no. 144 (1995): 999–1019.

⁵ David D. Laitin, “The Civic Culture at 30,” *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 1 (1995): 173.

⁶ See, for example, Karen S. Cook, Russell Hardin, and Margaret Levi, *Cooperation without Trust?* (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2005); Patrick Sturgis and Patten Smith, “Assessing the Validity of Generalized Trust Questions: What Kind of Trust Are We Measuring?” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 22, no. 1 (2010): 74–92.

⁷ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1995); Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jan W. van Deth and Sonja Zmerli, “Civicness, Equality, and Democracy a ‘Dark Side’ of Social Capital?” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 5 (2010): 631–39.

⁸ Although there are many studies focusing separately on social trust and governance, few have explored the relationship between the two. For example, see Jie Chen, Narisong Huhe, and Chunlong Lu, “Generalized vs. Particularized Social Capital: Social Trust and Grassroots Governance in Urban China,” In *Toward Better Governance in China: An Unconventional Pathway of Political Reform*, ed. Baogang Guo and Dennis Hickey (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

⁹ Fukuyama, *Trust*; Lucian W. Pye, “Civility, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Three Powerful Concepts for Explaining Asia,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, no. 4 (1999): 763–82.

¹⁰ See, for example, Jan Delhey and Kenneth Newton, “Predicting Cross-National Levels of Social Trust: Global Pattern or Nordic Exceptionalism?” *European Sociological Review* 21, no. 4 (2005): 311–27; Soo Jiuan Tan and Siok Kuan Tambyah, “Generalized Trust and Trust in Institutions in Confucian Asia,” *Social Indicators Research* 103, no. 3 (2010): 1–21.

¹¹ Tianjian Shi, “Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan,” *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001): 401–19; Andrew J. Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6–17; Qing Yang and Wenfang Tang, “Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China: Culture, Mobilization, or Performance?” *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 3 (2010): 415–36; Lianjiang Li, “Distrust in Government Leaders, Demand for Leadership Change, and Preference for Popular Elections in Rural China,” *Political Behavior* 33, no. 2 (2011): 291–311.

¹² Uslaner, “Democracy and Social Capital”; Christian Bjørnskov, “Determinants of Generalized Trust: A Cross-Country Comparison,” *Public Choice* 130, no. 1 (2007): 1–21.

¹³ Shuna Wang and Yang Yao, “Grassroots Democracy and Local Governance: Evidence from Rural China,” *World Development* 35, no. 10 (2007): 1635–49.

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