



A loosening tray of sand? Age, period, and cohort effects on generalized trust in Reform-Era China, 1990–2007 [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transition of generalized trust in mainland China from 1990 to 2007. Using the methodology of intrinsic estimator to analyze the repeated cross-sectional survey data from the World Values Survey, we separate age, period, and cohort effects on the extent of generalized trust of Chinese citizens. Empirical findings suggest that (1) There is a declining trend in the level of generalized trust across different periods from 1990 to 2007, net of age and cohort effects; (2) People's confidence in an ordinary social member increases as they age, a pattern resembling that of many Western societies; (3) The cohorts that experience the totalitarian Mao's Era in the formative stage of their life course stand out in evidently lower trust in generalized others, relative to those cohorts with formative stage falling in the Reform Era.

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1. Introduction

As an essential component of desirable social virtue, people's perception of other social members' trustworthiness, or generalized trust, is fundamental to the wellbeing of a society. For instance, the level of generalized trust, according to extant studies, has been found to be positively related to democratization (Putnam, 2000; Paxton, 2002), economic development (Fukuyama, 1995), and interpersonal cooperation (Cook, 2005; Macy and Skvoretz, 1998), among others. In light of such significances, it is not surprising that the transition of generalized trust has always been on the research agenda of social scientists from many disciplines (for a review, see Nannestad, 2008; Welch et al., 2005).

To date, however, the majority of studies in this direction have been conducted in Western societies, such as the United States (e.g. Clark and Eisenstein, 2013; Putnam, 2000; Robinson and Jackson, 2001; Wilkes, 2011). Relatively, we know considerably less about such change in the East. According to the seminal research of Fukuyama (1995), many East Asian societies differ from nations like the U.S. in their Confucian tradition, which is believed to lead to a low level of generalized trust (except for Japan). This is especially the case in China, a society called “a loose tray of sand” by Fukuyama, where people

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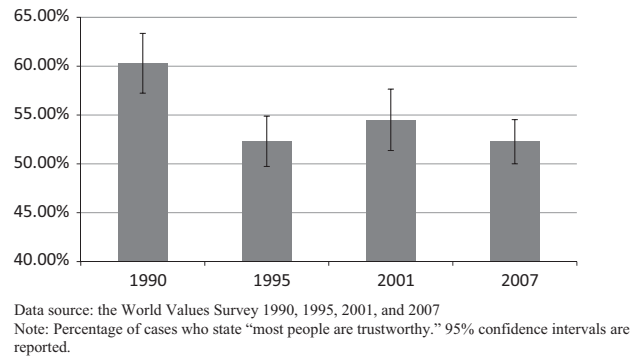


Fig. 1. Descriptive tendency of generalized trust in mainland China.

generally have low confidence in individuals other than family members (similar conclusions can be found in studies such as Markus and Kitayama (1991), Redding (1995), Shin (2005), and Tang (2005)). In light of these unique features of many Eastern nations, it is theoretically and practically relevant to look into whether people's attitude toward others' trustworthiness has been growing, declining, or staying stable amidst the large-scale social transition over the past decades, such as modernization, economic reform, and globalization.

We set our focus on a widely documented low-trust East Asian society: mainland China. This case study makes academic contributions by highlighting how generalized trust may vary within a comprehensive social reform from a socialist regime to a market-oriented society (the Reform) (Bian, 2002; Nee, 1989; Nee and Matthews, 1996). This encompassing social change is without precedent in many other nations, enabling us to investigate different mechanisms that simultaneously shape the trajectory of generalized trust. For instance, the Reform process underscores a *period effect*, where the replacement of the communist egalitarianism with phenomenal economic inequality might reduce the average level of trust (e.g. Bjørnskov, 2008; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Uslaner, 2002). However, the Reform also introduces a horizontalization tendency in interpersonal relationship, which may encourage social engagement and generalized trust (Freitag and Traunmüller, 2009; Glanville et al., forthcoming; Paxton, 2007). The social reform in China is also relevant to *cohort effect*, as different birth cohorts- e.g., the Mao's Era cohorts versus the Reform Era cohorts- might accumulate contrasting life experiences in their formative stage, differentiating their confidence in generalized others for the life time (e.g. Putnam, 2000). Finally, an aging trend of the Chinese population is concomitant to the Reform process. Since *age effect* entails a life-course pattern of generalized trust (e.g. Robinson and Jackson, 2001), it is necessary to separate it from period and cohort effects. In sum, this article aims to illustrate the potential age, period, and cohort effects on generalized trust, which is enlightening for not only China but also many other societies.

The present study serves to *update* the perception on the status of generalized trust among the Chinese. Although Chinese society has been viewed as "a loose tray of sand", evidence supporting this point of view in previous studies is largely based on the image of traditional Chinese or oversea diaspora (e.g. Redding, 1995). Thus, the findings based on the survey of contemporary China should be able to better our understandings of Chinese society as well as other countries in the East.

This study represents the first attempt to rigorously examine the transition of generalized trust in an East Asian country by decomposing age, period, and cohort effects (APC). The rest parts proceed with the theoretical discussion, based on which we propose our hypotheses. Subsequently, we introduce empirical data and measures, present major results, and discuss the theoretical implications of this study.

2. Theoretical background: age, period, and cohort differentials in generalized trust

In the sociological literature, there are three discernable formation mechanisms for a specific tendency, that is, age, period, and cohort effects (Firebaugh, 1997; Glenn, 2005; Yang, 2011). In the case of trust studies, age effect reveals a life-course pattern and sheds light on the *potential* consequences of population aging on the changing level of trust.¹ Period effect focuses on historical transition's impacts on people's confidence in others, which, evidently, is of great relevance against the background of the Reform in China. Finally, cohort effect marks out the differential levels of generalized trust across birth cohorts, highlighting how cohort replacement may alter the level of generalized trust in a society. Evidently, all three effects should be estimated in order to fully understand the variation of generalized trust in China.

¹ It is necessary to point out that the overall level of generalized trust should remain the same if the life-course trajectory of trust is fully predictable and the population composition is unchanged, net of period and cohort effects. However, in the case of a positively connection between aging and trust, an aging tendency of a society might raise the overall level of trust. This is a type of compositional effect.

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