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## Trust Transformation in Chinese Social Governance: Postprint

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**Date:** 2017-03-08T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, Chinese society has been undergoing a historically unprecedented great practice. Various emerging and continuously deepening new forms of social life—such as the extensive penetration and upgrading of virtual space and information exchange, the accelerating transformation of social mobility and cultural concepts, the increasing refinement and specialization of labor division and work styles, and the universal expansion and instrumentalization of interpersonal communication and psychological experiences—are compelling people to more urgently than in any other historical era demand the creation of a universal environment of trust in social practice and interaction, and the achievement of effective cooperation. To realize the social ideals of prosperity, democracy, civilization, and integrity, as well as the core socialist values, China's social governance process will face three major transformations of trust: the intergroup trust transformation from ingroup trust to outgroup trust, the abstract trust transformation from interpersonal trust to institutional trust, and the social trust transformation from a low-trust society to a high-trust society.

### Full Text

### Special Topic: Psychology and Social Governance

#### ChinaXiv Partner Journal

#### The Transition of Trust in China's Social Governance Process\*

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### Abstract

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, Chinese society has been undergoing an unprecedented historical transformation.

The continuous emergence and deepening of new social life forms—including the widespread penetration and upgrading of virtual spaces and information exchange, the accelerating social mobility and cultural transformation, the increasing specialization of labor division and work methods, and the utilitarian expansion of interpersonal relationships and psychological experiences—have made it more imperative than ever to forge a universal trust environment in social practice and interaction to achieve effective cooperation. To realize the social ideals of prosperity, democracy, civilization, and integrity, as well as the core socialist values, China's social governance process will face three major trust transitions: the shift from in-group to out-group trust in intergroup relations, the shift from interpersonal to institutional trust in abstract trust systems, and the shift from a low-trust to a high-trust society.

**Keywords:** social governance, trust transition, out-group trust, institutional trust, high-trust society

**DOI:** 10.16418/j.issn.1000-3045.2017.02.006

Social psychology defines trust as a psychological state in which individuals, based on cognition or emotion (or both), hold positive expectations for others' future behavior while judging their own vulnerability and risk tolerance. Trust relationships embody the interdependence between interacting subjects, the developmental nature inherent in the interaction process, and the anticipated reciprocity of interaction outcomes. Trust can reduce social complexity, enhance social productivity, and conserve valuable social resources. Trust-building constitutes a crucial task in China's social governance process. From a social psychological perspective, social governance in China must attend to the distinctive contemporary characteristics of people's psychology and behavior.

Social activities now exhibit novel features: a dramatic increase in quantity, innovative forms, diverse types, rich content, rapid pace, extensive influence, and constant change. Both the processes and outcomes of social activities depend on the specific contexts in which events occur, yet often transcend the boundaries of physical space and limited time. Moreover, the subjects participating in social activities have undergone significant changes. In traditional society, the objects of social interaction were typically "familiar people"—limited in number and repeatedly encountered in similar situations. In modern society, however, interaction objects include both "familiar people" and "strangers." These strangers bring not merely a quantitative increase but, more importantly, issues of "randomness," "contingency," and "non-repetitiveness" in interaction contexts. Additionally, the specialization of social activities continues to deepen. Modern society offers individuals increasing opportunities and resources while also imposing greater demands. The accelerated development of society inevitably prevents individuals from acquiring sufficient time and skills to master endless knowledge systems and complex job requirements, making the refinement of labor division, diversification of positions, multiplication of social roles, and complication of social activities inevitable trends. Finally, the expanding information resources have objectively fostered a foundation for diverse ideas

and ideological conflicts. Under the influence of large-scale population mobility across geographic regions and rapid modern information dissemination, different cultural concepts, lifestyles, and social perspectives collide and merge, adjust under impact, and aggregate through diffusion. Society both desires and demands that these diverse elements become components of a homogeneous or essentially homogeneous social order.

## **1. Transition of Intergroup Trust: From In-Group to Out-Group Trust**

### **1.1 In-Group Trust and Out-Group Trust**

In-group trust represents a dominant force in behavior and psychology in traditional societies. Its objects are limited to individuals' familiar people, typically based on kinship, acquaintances, or neighbors, emerging from and manifesting within closed groups. It supports the existence and operation of in-groups, maintaining their specific stability. Out-group trust, by contrast, targets open, non-specific strangers who are not familiar in a personal sense. Significant differences may exist between the trustor and the trusted. For these strangers, the trustor lacks face-to-face interaction experience and sometimes clear social categorical identity. However, out-group trust can transcend the boundaries of face-to-face experience; temporary unfamiliarity does not become an obstacle to further interaction, as individuals believe that strangers are reliable and capable of future cooperation. Solidary collective action and generative social exchange fundamentally depend on out-group trust, which extends beyond the scope of social life defined by specific individual personalities.

### **1.2 The Open Modern Society as a Platform for Intergroup Trust**

In terms of population mobility, traditional societies typically exhibited low mobility due to farmers' livelihood dependence on land and the concept of "born here, die here," characteristic of rural societies. Modern society, however, has witnessed dramatically enhanced mobility due to rapid socioeconomic development and improved productivity. The *China Migration Development Report (2015)* indicates that China's floating population reached 253 million by the end of 2014 and is projected to increase to 291 million by 2020, with 55% residing in their current location for over three years and more than half expressing intention for long-term settlement. In Beijing, for instance, the floating population reached 7.738 million in 2012, meaning one out of every three people came from other provinces. Such massive population flows provide labor for economic development while also "causing the normative systems and conceptual elements of social structure to become increasingly complex and diversified." Simultaneously, as social production expands further, social division of labor inevitably becomes more refined to ensure effective operation and functional coordination across society, strengthening production specialization. This has gradually dismantled the closed interaction patterns of agrarian societies, with

more villagers leaving their villages to seek employment and income opportunities, rendering social networks more open. Strangers from all corners of the country interact frequently in daily life, constituting important components of national operation, core driving forces of market economy maintenance, and key dominant contents of social transformation.

### **1.3 Transition from Renqing Society to Contract Society as Guarantee for Intergroup Trust Transformation**

While open society provides a platform for intergroup trust expansion, the corresponding increase in anonymity and uncertainty in interactions necessitates a shift in social exchange forms from the “renqing” (human sentiment) bonds of acquaintance societies to the “contract” bonds of stranger societies. In traditional society, renqing could serve as an exchange carrier based on the high homogeneity among community members—neighbors knew each other well, and exchanges could radiate through “private relationships.” Modern society’s high heterogeneity, however, requires guarantees of efficiency and fairness in exchange processes through “contracts,” legal principles, and institutions. Modern society witnesses numerous daily cooperation behaviors, a large proportion of which are cross-group collaborations. Cross-boundary cooperation represents a more important form of cooperation, a more needed value concept, and a more necessary social practice in modern society, with out-group trust serving as the crucial link. The dissolution of traditional social cohesion forces intergroup trust to expand from within outward. The disintegration of the work-unit system introduces new social risks to social trust. The highly centralized “state–work-unit–individual” connection formed under the traditional work-unit system has been replaced by atomized communities and associations, accompanied by “atomization trends and the rapid disappearance of utopian spirit and public spiritual life reliant on unit society, ushering in an era of social indifference.” A modern society inevitably witnesses the daily dissipation of in-group cohesion, the continuous dissolution of physical and social space for in-group life, and the expanding physical and social space for out-group life.

### **1.4 Out-Group Trust as a Condition for Social Modernization**

While in-group cohesion remains important, accepting, identifying with, and trusting out-groups constitutes a crucial condition for achieving organic solidarity and social integration in the modernization process. “Particularized trust (for insiders) carries minimal risk but will not make you—or the broader community—prosperous or vibrant. Generalized trust prevails in democratic societies, whereas particularized trust is more typical in authoritarian and totalitarian societies. Generalized trust makes people more willing to participate in associations and recognize moral obligations, while particularized trust makes people withdraw from civic life.” Modern society is highly pluralistic yet cannot avoid this pluralism, achieving organic solidarity and social integration only within a pluralistic state. Under rapid social development, individuals face environments

of highly specialized and professionalized work skills, requiring complementary lifestyles, social intelligence, and occupational capabilities to enhance value and improve quality of life. This makes individuals feel ill-adapted to the simultaneous processes of increasing individualization and high social integration in modern society. Addressing these issues demands strong social learning capabilities and active social participation consciousness, cultivating social intelligence within out-groups rather than retreating into in-groups and compressing one's own social space.

## 2. Transition of Abstract Trust: From Interpersonal to Institutional Trust

### 2.1 Current State of Institutional Trust in Contemporary China

Institutional trust in contemporary China remains in its primary stage, exhibiting distinct temporal characteristics.

**Central Strong, Local Weak.** China's government trust structure demonstrates a typical "central strong, local weak" pattern: Chinese citizens exhibit highest trust in the central government, followed by provincial governments, then prefecture-level city governments, with county/district governments and township governments (sub-district offices) ranking lowest [Figure 1: see original paper]. What factors contribute to these varying trust levels in party committees and governments at different levels? This correlates closely with citizens' understanding of each government level. Through television, internet, and other channels, citizens learn about the central government's policies benefiting the people, identify with these policies, and believe the central government earnestly seeks citizens' welfare. However, citizens have relatively more contact with local governments in daily life, and local governments' inaction or incomplete action negatively impacts citizen trust, creating impressions such as "central policies are good, but implementation fails" and "policies from above, countermeasures from below," thereby reducing trust in local governments and producing the "central strong, local weak" pattern.

**Urban-Rural Differences.** Government trust also exhibits urban-rural disparities, with urban residents' trust significantly lower than rural residents' trust. What causes this difference? Multiple factors influence government trust: (1) At the individual level, social capital, generalized trust levels, mutual assistance behavior, and social participation all positively affect government trust. (2) Marketization progress shows a linear negative relationship with residents' government trust. (3) Government performance—not only economic but also non-economic aspects such as food safety and judicial systems—positively correlates with trust: higher satisfaction with government performance yields higher trust. (4) Authoritarianism, referring to individuals' endorsement of China's unique political culture, also positively correlates with government trust.

**Departmental Variations.** Beyond the central-local and urban-rural pat-

terns, significant departmental differences exist in government trust. As shown in [Figure 2: see original paper], Chinese residents express relatively high satisfaction with government capabilities in earthquake relief, compulsory education, pension insurance, and medical insurance, but relatively low satisfaction with food safety supervision, environmental protection, household registration systems, and charitable causes. Further research indicates that earthquake relief, judicial systems, and household registration systems most significantly impact government trust. Except for earthquake relief, the other two score at medium or below-medium levels, suggesting that institutional trust in China requires further development.

Institutional trust relies on a foundation of cognitive representation. Relevant interaction factors can stimulate institutional trust under reasonable order—fairness and justice are particularly crucial for maintaining trust in judicial systems. Compared to trust in township governments' capability to uphold justice, trust in their willingness to do so more powerfully explains villagers' electoral participation, confirming that citizens prioritize government work willingness over results, and fairness over efficiency. Cognitively, individuals assume stable consistency between institutional representatives' behavior in institutional order and their personal character, generating institutional trust based on this assumed consistency. Institutional trust manifests as identification-based trust, constituting a fundamental element of social interaction and a constructive force in social governance. With state-mandated enforcement, institutional trust helps people consciously abide by existing rules and comply with binding decisions made by various institutions and departments. As Giddens argues, "With the development of abstract systems, trust in impersonal principles (and also in unknown others) has become a basic element of social existence. This impersonal trust differs from basic trust. Compared to earlier times, people today have a strong psychological need to find trustworthy persons but lack institutionally organized personal connections." Traditional society was a "face-to-face" society with fewer interaction subjects, frequently repeated participation, limited spatiotemporal scope, and weak mobility, resulting in familiar identities, high personality trait recognition, and easily formed emotional trust. Modern society, by contrast, is a "back-to-back" society with dramatically increased interaction subjects, expanded spatiotemporal scope, and strong mobility, leading to anonymous identities, low personality trait recognition, weakened emotional trust, and highlighted cognitive trust. This transition from emotional to cognitive trust reflects a monumental shift in social order. Social order based on personal or interpersonal trust mainly appears in small-scale, low-differentiation groups, whereas order based on institutional trust appears in large-scale, highly differentiated, complex groups under modern spatiotemporal structures. A crucial precondition for extending cognitive trust to strangers is that trustors can access sufficient information to develop confidence that trustees will consider and protect trustors' interests. Information sources for breeding confidence are extensive, including the efficiency and fairness of state power, universal social norms that groups should observe, and trustees' reputations.

## 2.2 Cultivating Mature Institutional Trust in Contemporary China's Social Governance Process

Institutional trust positively influences residents' consumption behavior, environmental governance participation, new rural pension insurance payments, and political participation. To a large extent, institutional or public trust is considered superior to interpersonal or private trust, serving as a criterion for judging social modernization. "Symbolic media" factors stipulated by institutions—such as currency, law, and power—can operate effectively and efficiently only with trust playing an essential role. Without sufficient confidence in the effectiveness, reliability, and legitimacy of these institutional abstract symbols, modern society's institutional system cannot function normally, and social order cannot be guaranteed. If a society's institutional system collapses, the credit of these symbolic abstractions—or people's confidence in them—will inevitably be lost, damaging the society's legal authority, government authority, and monetary system, ultimately eroding both institutional and interpersonal trust.

## 3. Transition of Social Trust: From Low-Trust to High-Trust Society

### 3.1 Meanings of High-Trust and Low-Trust Societies

From a macro-level social trust perspective, Fukuyama categorizes countries into high-trust and low-trust societies. High-trust societies feature mature civil societies where maximum social benefits are achieved through low-cost social cooperation and mutually beneficial partnerships. Low-trust societies lack mature civil society characteristics, instead relying on 熟人圈子 (acquaintance circles) and nepotistic connections to maximize social benefits. In terms of trust radius, high-trust societies have large, comprehensive trust radii where people spontaneously, actively, and enthusiastically participate in social activities, breaking through group boundaries to interact with people of different backgrounds, types, and identities, while maintaining high trust in public affairs, organizations, and institutions. Social capital—“features of social organization such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”—is abundant in high-trust societies, helping individuals build social networks to obtain resources, opportunities, information, support, and aid. Conversely, low-trust societies have small, narrow trust radii where social activities occur within closed circles of acquaintance networks, strictly constrained by group boundaries, with interaction objects having similar backgrounds and identities. Trust exists and develops primarily within private life spheres. Low-trust social capital operates within self-cycling systems, characterized by limitations and domain specialization, making it difficult to cultivate citizens' enthusiasm and responsibility for public affairs or develop generalized social trust.

### 3.2 Trust Levels in Chinese Society

**Citizens' Perceptions of Low Trust.** Current public perception indicates relatively low social trust, supported by official data. For instance, 2015 national court trial execution data show 35,719 fraud cases, an 8% increase from 2014. Loan contract disputes rose dramatically: new civil lending disputes reached 1,536,681 cases (up 41.48%), interbank lending cases 9,873 (up 10.8%), inter-enterprise lending cases 12,278 (up 3.87%), and other loan contract disputes 802,738 (up 24.09%). A *China Youth Daily* article on July 13, 2015, reported: "Data from 360's online shopping compensation service shows at least 230,000 annual online fraud cases, with total reported amounts of 47.71 million yuan and average losses of 2,070 yuan per case. Compared to 2013, online fraud reports increased by 3.56%, while average losses surged by 42.90%."

**Contrasting View: High-Trust Society.** Some scholars argue China is a high-trust society with rising trust levels over the past decade. Tang Lina's research based on China General Social Survey data indicates that the proportion of people expressing distrust of strangers decreased from 73.4% in 2003 to 52.2% in 2013, while those expressing trust increased from 4.3% to 18.8%, consistent with World Values Survey data for China. This inconsistency between public attitudes and actual behavior suggests that building a mature high-trust society in China's governance process requires time.

### 3.3 Pathways to Cultivating a High-Trust Society

**Social Justice and Procedural Fairness.** High social trust levels closely relate to fair processes of material redistribution, requiring strict adherence to procedural justice principles. Procedural justice is reflected in decision-making contexts through specific interpersonal behaviors and decision-making process structures. It emphasizes not only regional equality and economic access for all but also cultural access equality for all groups. Current Chinese society still contains factors causing social inequality that limit the trust capacity of the poor and vulnerable groups. Weakening existing group identities and differences to change current power and resource inequality structures can enhance disadvantaged groups' self-esteem and transform everyone's self-consciousness. A high-trust society requires not only fair material distribution strategies seeking equality in resources, opportunities, and outcomes among social groups but also establishing moral value and acceptance mechanisms equal for all. Only by identifying and eliminating constraints that hinder or suppress vulnerable groups' trust experiences at the social decision-making mechanism level can decision-making mechanisms gain overall trust from all demographic groups.

**Material Prosperity and Community Trust.** Since reform and opening-up, China's rapid economic development has created material abundance. The resource theory of trust suggests material prosperity helps increase social trust. Freitag et al. identify impartial and clean power institutions, welfare policies reducing income gaps, and broadly representative political interests as typical

factors influencing individual trust. Additionally, life quality satisfaction affects generalized trust, with income equality positively influencing life quality satisfaction. Conversely, adverse and threatening living conditions promote distrust, particularly among individuals with fewer social resources. Those living in resource-scarce areas face common hardships and dilemmas. When individuals feel confused, lost, or disappointed about their life control, they experience heightened feelings of insignificance and vulnerability, intensifying self-defense mechanisms and skeptical attitudes. Powerlessness amplifies the impact of anomie on distrust, with community anomie directly or indirectly causing distrust through increased powerlessness. Widespread community distrust interferes with neighbors' ability to form mutual connections, causing further community order collapse and promoting more distrust through a self-amplifying downward spiral. An important task of China's social governance is exploring and innovating healthy community trust.

**Institutions as a Force for High-Trust Society.** People's perception of institutional decision-making, implementation processes, and effects—namely institutional identification—determines the social atmosphere of trust. High levels of institutional identification reflect positive attributes of institutional decision-making, implementation, and effects, helping foster benign social emotions shared by all members. Broadly speaking, attitudes toward strangers correlate closely with institutional identification. Through direct or indirect experience, social members gradually form stable cognitive evaluations of institutional decision-making, implementation, and effects. Institutions' positive attributes and incentive factors can regulate social emotions and trustworthy behaviors of organizations and individuals, influencing social and interpersonal cooperation materially and shaping social members' behavioral habits, moral norms, and ideological consciousness through socialization mechanisms, thereby endogenously generating trust quality and literacy.

**Citizen Capacity Building as a Prerequisite.** Modernization's core trend involves individuals having opportunities and resources provided by the state, society, and family to develop and utilize their potential, ultimately making purposeful choices and pursuits that benefit both society and themselves. When people possess such social capabilities, dependence on tightly-knit in-groups gradually weakens. Breaking free from in-group control provides more opportunities and opens more space for mutually beneficial social exchange with out-group members. Conversely, socially vulnerable groups lack the social capabilities and economic resources to promote trust. Those in disadvantaged situations and positions exhibit more distrust on average. Premier Li Keqiang's 2016 government work report proposed completing vocational skills training for over 21 million migrant workers, enhancing out-group trust by increasing people's sense of gain. Modernization is a process in which individuals' increasingly enhanced work skills can promote the gradual disappearance of in-group cohesion dominance, reducing dependence on in-groups and dissolving group boundaries. Cooperation from bridging groups yields greater benefits, requiring trust in out-group members. Only when out-group trust emerges independently

from in-group trust can it grow.

#### 4. Outlook

A key objective of China's social governance is achieving a high-trust society.

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