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Hierarchical Trust and Governmental Performance in China

The Role of Political Culture as a Mediating Factor

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Abstract

The phenomenon of hierarchical political trust—i.e., the higher the level of government, the higher the level of political trust—is prevalent in China. This article examines the source of hierarchical trust using survey data from the fourth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey. The results indicate that while dissatisfaction with governmental performance is negatively associated with both central and local levels of government, attachment to the traditional, authoritarian, and paternalistic components of Chinese political culture significantly lessens the negative effect of dissatisfaction with governmental performance on central trust, but exerts no obvious effect on local trust. This finding not only helps to explain the local–central trust pattern but also contributes to an understanding of the consistently high level of public support for the single-party authoritarian system in China.

Keywords: hierarchical trust, political culture, governmental performance, China.

Introduction

The single-party authoritarian government in China enjoys a consistently high level of political support and legitimacy, while democracies around the world are experiencing declining levels of trust. The reason for this has always been of great academic interest to scholars and observers. Numerous studies have shed light on the sources of institutional trust and regime support in China;[1] however, many of the findings contradict one another. For instance, there are

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[1] Tianjian Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Zhengxu Wang, "Before the Emergenace of Critical Citizens: Economic Development and Political Trust in China," *International Review of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 155-171; and many others.

different conclusions about the impact of political culture on political trust, with some suggesting that political culture enhances political trust in China [2] and others disagree.[3]

This article is a new attempt to explore the impact of traditional Chinese political culture on institutional trust in China. Instead of exploring the determinants of institutional trust directly, sources of hierarchical trust have been examined—a special phenomenon observed in China in which trust in central government is higher than trust in local government[4]—to show that attachment to Chinese political culture contributes greatly to central trust, but exerts no visible effect on local trust. This conclusion not only confirms that attachment to political culture enhances the Chinese public's trust in the government in general but also partly explains the formation mechanism of the phenomenon of hierarchical trust. This is also an important finding that helps explain the popularity of the central government.

The article begins with a detailed review of previous studies on the source of hierarchical trust. After describing the data used, the empirical findings are presented in the third section. Finally, the article addresses the political implications of this research.

1. Hierarchical Trust, Political Culture, and Governmental Performance

The general argument of this research is that attachment to political culture lessens the impact of dissatisfaction with governmental performance on central trust, but not local trust. Three key concepts—hierarchical trust, political culture, and governmental performance—are introduced below.

1.1 Hierarchical Trust Pattern

Considerable studies have found that hierarchical political trust, i.e., that citizens trust the national government more than local government, is prevalent in China.[5] Two major explanations for hierarchical trust are governmental

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[2] Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001): 401-419; Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[3] Qing Yang and Wenfang Tang, "Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China: Culture, Mobilization, or Performance?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 3 (2010): 415-436; Yang Zhong, "Do Chinese People Trust Their Local Government, and Why? An Empirical Study of Political Trust in Urban China," *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no. 3 (2014): 31-44.

[4] Cary Wu and Rima Wilkes, "Local–National Political Trust Patterns: Why China Is an Exception," *International Political Science Review* 39, no. 4 (2018): 436-454.

[5] Dan Chen, "Local Distrust and Regime Support: Sources and Effects of Political Trust in China," *Political Research Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017): 314-326; Jie Chen, *A Middle Class without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bruce J. Dickson, Mingming Shen, and Jie Yan, "Generating Regime Support in Contemporary China: Legitimation and the Local Legitimacy Deficit," *Modern China* 43, no. 2 (2017): 123-155; Hsin-hao Huang, "Explaining Hierarchical Government Trust in

performance and political control. The governmental performance theory argues that the level of political trust is based on people's evaluations of incumbents' performance. More specifically, since Chinese people assess local governmental performance with less tolerance than they assess that of the central government,[6] dissatisfaction with governmental performance erodes local trust more severely than central trust. The following studies confirm that perceived governmental performance leads to hierarchical trust. Using survey data from the 2012 World Values Survey (WVS) conducted in China, Huang indicated that perceived governmental performance and assessment of family economic position have mediating effects on the higher level of trust in central government.[7] Another study based on a comprehensive national project—"Survey of Public Trust in Societal Organizations in China"—reached a similar conclusion that perceptions of public governance and public service provision are responsible for the formation of hierarchical trust.[8]

On the other hand, political control theory holds that the hierarchical trust pattern in China can be attributed to political fear and exposure to political information. According to Stockmann et al., political fear is directed mainly at central government. Therefore, higher levels of political fear would lead people to express their trust in the central government when interviewed in opinion surveys.[9] Moreover, since media channels for political information controlled and censored by the government are far more critical of local governments than the central government,[10] people who learn about politics

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China: The Perspectives of Institutional Shaping and Perceived Performance," *Taiwan Journal of Political Science* 59 (2014): 55-90; Lianjiang Li, "Political Trust in Rural China," *Modern China* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228-258; Lianjiang Li, "Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside," *Comparative Politics* 40, no. 2 (2008): 209-226; Lianjiang Li, "The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China," *Modern China* 39, no. 1 (2013): 3-36; Lianjiang Li, "Reassessing Trust in the Central Government: Evidence from Five National Surveys," *The China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 100-121; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 22, no. 1 (1996): 28-61; Shi, "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan"; Jiebing Wu, Yong Li, and Chengcheng Song, "Temporal Dynamics of Political Trust in China: A Cohort Analysis," *China Information* 34, no. 1 (2020): 109-136.

[6] Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Wenfang Tang, and Nicholas F Martini, "A Chinese Popularity Function: Sources of Government Support," *Political Research Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2014): 16–25.

[7] Huang, "Explaining Hierarchical Government Trust in China: The Perspectives of Institutional Shaping and Perceived Performance."

[8] Huaxing Liu and John. W. Raine, "Why Is There Less Public Trust in Local Government Than in Central Government in China?" *International Journal of Public Administration* 39, no. 4 (2016): 258-269.

[9] Daniela Stockmann, Ashley Esarey, and Jie Zhang, "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese State? Evidence Calling into Question Political Fear as an Explanation for Overreporting of Political Trust," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 5 (2018): 1105-1121.

[10] Zhenhua Su, Yanyu Ye, Jingkai He, and Waibin Huang, "Constructed Hierarchical Government Trust in China: Formation Mechanism and Political Effects," *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2016): 771-794.

only through mainstream media are more likely to have negative impressions of their local governments, thus developing hierarchical trust in the political authorities. Previous studies regarding the formation mechanisms of hierarchical trust have found that political control and propaganda play a more critical role in sustaining China's unique local–central political trust pattern than governmental performance and political culture.[11]

However, although previous research has important implications regarding the sources of hierarchical governmental trust, fewer studies have explored the effect of political culture, which plays an important role in affecting political support in China, on the varying levels of trust in central and local governments. Concerning the impact of political culture on hierarchical trust, previous research has argued that attachment to traditional political culture provides a powerful explanation for the phenomenon whereby most Chinese people have limited knowledge of and contact with central government, yet a deep affection for and trust in it.[12] Therefore, students of Chinese politics should continue their research to fill existing gaps in scholarly analysis by contributing to the understanding of how political culture strengthens central trust.

1.2 Political Culture and Political Trust

Political culture is widely regarded as one of the most prominent influences on how citizens form their views of the government. The most outstanding of the studies on this topic is found in Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*, which was followed for decades by scholars studying the relationship between subjective orientations toward politics and the establishment of democracy.[13] Since 1981, the WVS and European Values Study have generated comparative data for cultural studies. With the help of these data, scholars have been able to "establish similarities and differences between a large number of countries with different cultural and structural conditions as well as historical legacies."[14] From the beginning of this century, Asian countries also became involved in gathering data through survey research, such as with the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), to learn about the influences of culture. Questions about cultural norms were included in the surveys so that researchers could explore the important bearing of culture on political attitudes and behaviors. Studies that were generated by these data show that although Asian countries

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[11] Su et al., "Constructed Hierarchical Government Trust in China: Formation Mechanism and Political Effects"; Wu et al., "Temporal Dynamics of Political Trust in China: A Cohort Analysis."

[12] Li, "Political Trust in Rural China."

[13] Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton university press, 1963).

[14] Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Dieter Fuchs, and Jan Zielonka, eds. *Democracy and Political Culture in Eastern Europe* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 16.

have distinct cultural patterns, the relationship between culture and political attitudes found in many Western societies also exists in Asian societies.

Against this background, this study focuses on the effect of political culture on political attitudes in China. Concerning the relationship between Chinese political culture and public perceptions of government, Min's contribution marks the starting point of research using national sample surveys.[15] He argued that Confucian *minben* (民本) thought sustains public support for the authoritarian regime, because it emphasizes that people should obey the rulers as long as they secure the means of living. Building on Min's research, Shi investigated the effect of particular dimensions of traditional political culture on Chinese perceptions of and engagement in politics using data from parallel surveys of China and Taiwan collected in 1993.[16] He indicated that citizen orientations toward political power, political authority, and conflict are important in strengthening popular support for the government in both regions. On the other hand, while public assessment of governmental performance is more important for enhancing political trust in democratic Taiwan than in authoritarian China, political trust depends relatively more on traditional political culture in mainland China. In *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*, Shi pursued the impact of Confucianism on citizens' political choices.[17] Shi's findings were consistent with many previous studies, in that people oriented toward the "Confucian legacy of hierarchical collectivism and benevolent paternalism" are more likely to be supportive of a paternalistic style of government than those who live in societies where Confucianism is not widely prevalent.[18]

Two general conclusions can be drawn from the studies reviewed above. First, most Chinese citizens are deeply attached to some typical East Asian values, including "emphasizing collective welfare before individual rights, order and harmony based on hierarchy and conformity, and the ideal of virtue-based benevolent paternalistic rule."[19] Second, empirical evidence has confirmed that public inclinations toward traditional culture contribute greatly to public support for China's authoritarian rule. Building on the foundation of the existing research, we should expect people with higher levels of attachment

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[15] Min Qi, *Zhongguo zhengzhi wenhua: minzhu zhengzhi nanchan de shehui xinli yinsu* [*Chinese Political Culture: Social Psychological Factors That Explain the Difficulty in Achieving Democratic Politics*]. (Kunming: Yunnan People's Press, 1989).

[16] Shi, "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan."

[17] Shi, "The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan."

[18] Chong-min Park and Doh Chull Shin, "Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?" *Asian Survey* 46, no. 3 (2006): 341-361; Doh Chull Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia* (Cambridge: UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Yang Zhong, Jie Chen, and John Scheb, "Mass Political Culture in Beijing: Findings from Two Public Opinion Surveys," *Asian Survey* 38, no. 8 (1998): 763-783.

[19] Park and Shin, "Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?" 360.

to traditional values to be more trusting of the government at both central and local levels. An overview and measurement of the components of the current Chinese political culture is given in the latter part of this article.

1.3 Assessment of Governmental Performance and Political Trust

Governmental performance here refers to "the capacity of the governments to effectively formulate and implement sound policies."[20] Evaluation of the quality of governmental performance has long been regarded as an important determinant of public trust in governments.[21] There is growing empirical literature on the association between assessment of governmental performance and political trust in China. As argued by Yang and Tang, public support for the current regime in China stems from "individual rational choice based heavily on institutional performance—especially the subjective evaluation of the performances."[22] Specifically, the high levels of political trust at both the central and local levels of government are largely due to citizen satisfaction with the government's achievements in improving economic well-being, combating official corruption, and providing good public services.[23] On the other hand, the level of institutional trust, especially local trust, can be harmed by government corruption, inefficiency, and poor service provision.[24] Therefore, we should expect negative evaluations of government performance to have an inverse relationship to both central and local trust.

In summary, the studies above generally indicate that preference for traditional political culture increases institutional trust and dissatisfaction with governmental performance damages it. This article is particularly interested in whether attachment to political culture can mitigate the damage of negative evaluations of governmental performance to political trust, with the expectation that the mitigating effect is associated with central trust, but not local trust. Building upon these insights, the following hypotheses will be tested to examine the sources of central and local trust in China:

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[20] Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Pablo Zoido-Lobatón, "Aggregating Governance Indicators," Policy Research Working Paper 2195 (World Bank Publications, 1999), 1.

[21] Timothy Wong, Ka-ying, Po-san Wan, and Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao, "The Bases of Political Trust in Six Asian Societies: Institutional and Cultural Explanations Compared," *International Political Science Review* 32, no. 3 (2011): 263-281.

[22] Yang and Tang, "Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China: Culture, Mobilization, or Performance?" 417.

[23] Lisheng Dong and Daniel Kübler, "Sources of Local Political Trust in Rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 110 (2018): 193-207; Wang, "Before the Emergence of Critical Citizens: Economic Development and Political Trust in China."

[24] Chen, "Local Distrust and Regime Support: Sources and Effects of Political Trust in China"; Zhong, "Do Chinese People Trust Their Local Government, and Why? An Empirical Study of Political Trust in Urban China."

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Preference for Chinese political culture is positively related to central and local trust.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Negative evaluation of government performance is negatively related to central and local trust.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Preference for Chinese political culture mediates the negative effects of pessimistic evaluations of governmental performance on central and local trust, and the mediating effect is stronger in central trust than in local trust.

2. Data and Analysis

This article uses data from a nationwide survey, the ABS IV, conducted in China in 2016. The respondents were Chinese citizens older than 18 years living in mainland China. The data were collected in face-to-face interviews. Before explaining the measurements of the variables used in this analysis, we must consider the honesty of the respondents who expressed their support for the government. While many worry that political fear undermines the reliability of survey data collected in China's authoritarian setting, the following three reasons show that the survey responses from China can be trusted.

First, many researchers of Chinese people's political behaviors have expressed confidence in the reliability of answers from respondents in China.[25] Another study shows that only 8-10% of the respondents tend to hide their dissatisfaction with the Chinese government.[26] Excluding these hidden preferences, China still has one of the highest levels of political support in the world, surpassing that of Western-style democracies. Second, focusing on response patterns, some researchers have argued that those of Chinese respondents are not distinctively different from those of respondents from many other regions.[27] Drawing on data from the WVS, He and Yang also found that the proportion of types/levels of trust in China exhibits similar patterns to other Asian and European countries.[28] Third, although the high percentage of "Don't know"/"Not applicable" responses in surveys conducted in China is often attributed to respondents' fear of political persecution, previous studies have demonstrated that low levels of education and political interest are mainly responsible for respondents' decisions to avoid providing answers to

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[25] Chen, "A Middle Class without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China"; Melanie Manion, "Survey Research in the Study of Contemporary China: Learning from Local Samples," *The China Quarterly*, no. 139 (1994): 741-765.

[26] Wenfang Tang, "The 'Surprise' of Authoritarian Resilience in China," *American Affairs* II, no. 1 (2018), https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/surprise-authoritarian-resilience-china/ (accessed January 15, 2023).

[27] Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 220-221, 268.

[28] Lingnan He and Dali L. Yang, "The Enigma of Political Trust in China: Survey Response Patterns and Preferences for Redistribution," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2019): 87-104.

sensitive political questions.[29] In short, "Political fear did not influence the way respondents answered the questions used to measure cultural orientations or those measuring political attitudes and behaviors."[30] This conclusion and the indications above allow the rest of the analysis to continue

2.1 Measuring Contemporary Chinese Political Culture

Chinese political culture is generally defined as a shared set of beliefs characterized by traditionalism and paternalism.[31] Another component, authoritarianism, will be added to constitute the definition of political culture used in this article. The following sections specify Chinese preferences for these three cultural norms.

a. Traditionalism

As China's most esteemed political tradition, traditionalism, or Confucianism, aims to maintain social and interpersonal harmony and sustain social relationships in terms of hierarchy.[32] For almost the entire 20th century, traditionalism was deemed backward and to be rejected in order to build a strong and civilized country. The 21st century, however, is witnessing the resurgence of traditional political culture in China.[33] Specifically, in order to strengthen its ruling legitimacy and to "fill the moral vacuum" caused by the end of Communist ideology following the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chinese government is attempting to stimulate a revival of Confucianism.[34] In particular, the *minben* doctrine, a human-based understanding of the mechanism of governance derived from Confucian and Mencian thinking helps create a people-loving image of the central government. Confucian tradition is also considered compatible with

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[29] Ren Liying Ren, *Surveying Public Opinion in Transitional China: An Examination of Survey Response*, Doctoral Dissertation (University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 2009); Tianjian Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System," in *How East Asians View Democracy*, eds. Yun-han Chu, Larry J. Diamond, Andrew. J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 209-237.

[30] Shi, "The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan," 64.

[31] Park and Shin, "Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?"; Lucian W. Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics: A Psycho-Cultural Study of the Authority Crisis in Political Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968); Shi, "The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan."

[32] Yu-tzung Chang, Yun-han Chu, and Frank Tsai, "Confucianism and Democratic Values in Three Chinese Societies," *Issues and Studies* 41, no. 4 (2005): 1-33.

[33] Anna Sun, "The Revival of Confucian Rites in Contemporary China," in *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond*, eds. Fenggang Yang and Joseph Tamney (The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 309-328.

[34] Daniel A. Bell, "From Marx to Confucius: Changing Discourses on China's Political Future," *Dissent* 54, no. 2 (2007): 23; Sébastien Billioud, "Confucianism, 'Cultural Tradition' and Official Discourses in China at the Start of the New Century," *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (2007): 50-65.

the new official ideology of "national rejuvenation." Coupled with official endorsement, rediscovered and reinvented traditional political culture has generated great enthusiasm among the public. The craze of learning Chinese classics (國學熱, *guoxue re*), particularly the thoughts of Confucius, is an obvious reflection of the collective embrace of traditional legacies.[35] People tend to regard cultural revival as a symbol of national revival, which is conducive to restoring their confidence in the government. In short, not only does the Confucian tradition still deeply influence people's ways of life,[36] it also continues to increase support for the regime.[37]

b. Authoritarianism

According to Linz, authoritarian regimes have three key features.[38] First, their political legitimacy largely comes from economic prosperity and social stability. Second, in contrast to totalitarian regimes, of which one of the most significant characteristics is widespread political participation, authoritarian regimes are not interested in actively involving their populations in politics. Instead, they encourage political apathy by reducing the channels for political participation. Therefore, despite the state's omnipresent influences, most of the citizens, as Linz put it, "did not think of how their society was being ruled, just as people in a democratic free society do not see their daily lives shaped by the values of a free society."[39] Third, the element of terror in an authoritarian system is not as central as it is in a totalitarian regime. Authoritarian governments tend to grant their people limited political freedom as long as it does not threaten the legitimacy of the regimes.

Applied to the case of China, first, while the Chinese government's "resilience"[40] and "adaptability"[41] help sustain the stability of authorities,

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[35] Geng Li, "Divination, Yijing, and Cultural Nationalism: The Self-Legitimation of Divination as an Aspect of 'Traditional Culture' in Post-Mao China," *China Review* 18, no. 4 (2018): 63-84.

[36] Min, "Chinese Political Culture: Social Psychological Factors That Explain the Difficulty in Achieving Democratic Politics"; Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from A Survey," *Daedalus* 122, no. 2 (1993): 95-123; Shi, "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan."

[37] Shi, "The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan"; Pei Zhong and Jing Vivian Zhan, "Authoritarian Critical Citizens and Declining Political Trust in China," *China Review* 21, no. 2 (2021): 117-152.

[38] Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

[39] Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 28.

[40] Nathan J. Andrew, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6-17.

[41] Baogang Guo, "Political Legitimacy and China's Transition," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 8, no. 1 (2003): 1-25; Jean Oi, "Bending without Breaking, the Adaptability of Chinese Political Institutions," in *How Far Across the River? Chinese Policy Reform at the Millennium*, eds. Nicholas Hope, Dennis T. Yang, and Mu Y. Li (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 450-468.

"benefiting the people" might play the most important role in guaranteeing the political legitimacy of the central government and preventing "the coming collapse of China."[42] Previous studies indicate that strong economic performance does play a primary role in sustaining the regime's legitimacy.[43] Furthermore, the Chinese government only allows fairly constrained channels for citizens to participate in politics,[44] and the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s political ideology has been significantly weakened nowadays compared to that in the age of Mao Zedong. Finally, although the CCP has long sought to suppress dissent, citizens' anger and discontent toward unlawful acts by political officials are sometimes permitted on social media, which makes people less sensitive to the deprivation of their civil liberties. Under such circumstances, the public seems satisfied with the current authoritarian regime as long as it continues to provide material benefits, maintains a stable social environment, and allows certain degrees of political freedom.[45] As such, it is understandable that orientation toward authoritarianism can generate a high level of institutional trust.

c. Paternalism

The goal of Confucian and Mencian philosophy lies in the government serving the masses by "using the family as a model."[46] A form of paternalism, in which the ruler must be father and mother to the people, has been practiced in China for centuries.[47] The powerlessness of citizens is another critical part of the successful implementation of paternalistic leadership. As argued by

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[42] Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[43] Marc L. Hutchison and Ping Xu, "Trust in China? The Impact of Development, Inequality, and Openness on Political Trust Across China's Provinces, 2001–2012," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2, no. 2 (2017): 176-195; Wu et al., "Temporal Dynamics of Political Trust in China: A Cohort Analysis."

[44] Adrian Shahbaz, Allie Funk, Amy Slipowitz, Kian Vesteinsson, Grant Baker, Cathryn Grothe, Manisha Vepa, and Tessa Weal eds. *Freedom on the Net 2021*, Freedom House (2021), http://freedomonthenet.org (accessed January 15, 2023).

[45] Chen, "A Middle Class without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China"; Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, "Democratization and the Middle Class in China: The Middle Class's Attitudes Toward Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2011): 705-719; Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010)

[46] Viren Murthy, "The Democratic Potential of Confucian Minben Thought," *Asian Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2000): 33-47.

[47] Fairbrother argued in more detail that the paternalistic Chinese state and its personnel are (1) faithful to an orthodoxy proving the standards of good governance, (2) morally exemplary, (3) concerned and caring for the people's spiritual and material livelihood, (4) attentive and willing to listen to the people's views, and (5) inspiring and encouraging of the people fulfilling their duties. See Gregory P. Fairbrother, "The Chinese Paternalistic State and Moral Education," in *Citizenship Education in China*, eds., Kerry J. Kennedy, Gregory Fairbrother, and Zhenzhou Zhao (London, England: Routledge, 2013), 11-26.

Pye, the Chinese people "never demanded their rights; they sought instead the sympathy, and indeed the pity of those more powerful than themselves."[48]

Until nowadays, the principle of paternalistic governance has resonated with that of imperial periods.[49] Specifically, the CCP values the "moral righteousness of the government" and "rules the nation through morality" (以德治國, *yide zhiguo*). The party has repeatedly stressed its efforts in managing paternalistic leadership, in which "clear and strong authority is combined with concern and considerateness and elements of moral leadership."[50] For the masses in China whose concept of "country" is an extended family, paternalism represents an ideal form of government, because the rulers' benevolence makes them feel sympathized with and understood. Therefore, it is natural that paternalistic orientation serves as one of the most important factors in sustaining people's trust in regime institutions.[51]

This article conceptualizes Chinese political culture as a set of universally shared views and beliefs with three covarying traits: hierarchical orientation and emphasizing collective welfare before individual rights, obedience to authority, and belief in a benevolent government. Table 1 presents an overview of the items in the ABS IV used to gauge Chinese people's orientation toward these three aspects of traditional political culture. Several important findings emerged from the distributions. First, more than three-fourths of the respondents agreed that personal interests and needs should be sacrificed to serve collective ones. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that respondents showed very strong approval of the traditional norms of social hierarchy and group primacy, or as Shi (2014: 68) put it, "Minorities had abandoned Confucian cultural norms." Moreover, regarding Chinese people's attachment to authoritarian values, most respondents expressed support for the system of one-party rule, which reflects public satisfaction and acceptance of the current political system in China. In addition, a large number of respondents showed submission to authority by demonstrating their appreciation of political control and opposition to put constraints on government acts. Finally, the results show that a clear majority of the respondents supported paternalistic leadership.

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[48] Lucian W. Pye, "The Spirit of Chinese Politics: A Psycho-Cultural Study of the Authority Crisis in Political Development," 19.

[49] Gregory P. Fairbrother, "Citizenship Education in a Divided China, 1949–1995," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 24, no. 1 (2004): 29-42; Shaorong Huang, "Communicate Heritage: Political and Cultural Similarities between Chinese Marxism and Confucian Tradition," *Chinese Media Research* 2, no. 2 (2006): 94-102; Elizabeth J. Perry, "Chinese Conceptions of 'Rights': From Mencius to Mao—and Now," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (2008): 37-50.

[50] Jiing-lih Farh and Bor-shiuan Cheng, "A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations," in *Management and Organizations in the Chinese Context*, eds. Jiatao Li and Anne S. Tsui (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 85.

[51] Yun-han Chu, "Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate Over the Chinese Model," *China Review* 13, no. 1 (2013): 1-42.

Table 1. Chinese People' Orientations Toward Traditionalism, Authoritarianism, and Paternalism

Item*	Result (%)**	Mean	SD	N
Traditionalism				
For the sake of the family, the individual should put his personal interests second.	88.88	3.07	0.57	3723
In a group, we should sacrifice our individual interest for the sake of the group's collective interest.	75.17	2.83	0.60	3721
For the sake of national interest, individual interest could be sacrificed.	80.35	2.95	0.64	3670
Authoritarianism				
Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office.	71.83	2.82	0.42	3181
If the government is constantly monitored and supervised by the legislature, it cannot accomplish great things.	59.83	2.62	0.66	2878
If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.	64.05	2.70	0.69	3569
Harmony of the community will be disrpted if people organize lots of groups.	73.68	2.82	0.64	3302
Paternalism				
Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.	66.20	2.75	0.66	3624
The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society.	56.40	2.60	0.72	3338
If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything.	52.80	2.58	0.67	3560
CFI=.952 TLI=.933 RMSEA=.038				
Covariance between traditionalism and authoritarianism=.455				
Covariance between traditionalism and paternalism=.563				
Covariance between authoritarianism and paternalism=.732				
Chi-Square(32)=228.144 P-value=.000				

Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.

Note: *The ABS IV asked the respondents to answer "Would you say you strongly disagree (1), agree, disagree, or strongly agree (4)?" with each statement. Respondents who choose "don't understand the question," "can't choose" or "decline to answer" have been deleted.

** The percentage of positive responses to the items as presented.

One might argue that there is substantial overlap among the three traits. To prove that traditionalism, authoritarianism, and paternalism are separate norms, I conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. The three statistics displayed at the bottom of Table 1—Confirmatory Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)—confirm that the model fits the data extremely well. The independent variables of traditional, authoritarian, and paternalistic orientation are additive indices labeled "traditionalism" (α=0.60), "authoritarianism" (α=0.52), and "paternalism" (α=0.72). This study used these three main characteristics of political culture as independent variables to explore the effects of political culture on governmental trust discrepancies in China.

2.2 Assessment of Governmental Performance

Public perceptions of four important policy areas—political corruption, implementation of the rule of law, political and economic inequalities, and governmental responsiveness—were used to measure respondents' satisfaction with governmental performance in China. An overview of the survey items and respondents' answers is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. The Public Assessment of Government Performances

Policy area	Item	Result (%)*	Mean	SD	N
Corruption situation	Corruption and bribe-taking are not widespread in the central government.	89.41	2.97	0.48	2963
	Corruption and bribe-taking are not widespread in the local government.	70.81	2.69	2.61	3238
Implementation of the rule of law	Officials who commit crimes usually go unpunished.	37.90	2.66	0.72	3158
	Government leaders often break the law or abuse their power.	36.32	2.68	0.73	3232
	The legislature is capable of keeping government leaders in check.	79.73	2.93	0.65	2921
Social and economic inequality	All citizens from different ethnic communities in China are treated equally by the government.	76.60	2.89	0.68	3782
	Rich and poor people are treated equally by the government.	68.30	2.78	0.78	3804
Government responsiveness	The government is responsive to what people want.	67.81	2.72	0.64	3318

Note: * The percentage of positive responses to the items as presented.
Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.

a. Public Perceptions of Corruption in China

Widespread and uncontrolled corruption has been a pressing issue for successive Chinese governments. To ensure the integrity of the CCP and lessen the influences of political corruption in violating and eroding public trust and political legitimacy, the Chinese government has undertaken several anticorruption campaigns to fight official misconduct. Since the CCP installed Xi Jinping as the president of China, much time and energy have been invested in the battle against massive official corruption.

The erosive effect of perceived perceptions of corruption on citizens' trust in authorities has been confirmed repeatedly in established and new democracies around the world, as well as in China.[52] Moreover, although governmental resolve to fight corruption helps to boost political trust among the Chinese public, particularly among people with lower levels of education and less access to information outside government propaganda,[53] anticorruption efforts fail to effectively repair political trust, especially trust toward provincial governments.[54]

The ABS IV respondents were asked to evaluate the pervasiveness of political corruption at central and local levels of government, report their experiences of witnessing political corruption, and evaluate governmental performance in fighting corruption. A prominent result shown in Table 2 is the sharp contrast between perceptions of corruption in the central government compared to local governments. Contrary to the result indicating that about 30% of respondents considered most or all of their local government officials corrupt, only around 10% felt the same way about corruption at the central level. Furthermore, about a fifth (18.4%) of the respondents or their family members/friends had personally witnessed an act of political misconduct. Finally, the vast majority of respondents showed great confidence in the government's regulations and campaigns to combat official corruption. Specifically, over 80% of respondents believed that the government "is doing its best" or "is

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[52] Christopher J. Anderson and Yuliya V. Tverdova, "Corruption, Political Allegiances, and Attitudes Toward Government in Contemporary Democracies," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 1 (2003): 91-109; Damarys Canache and Michael E. Allison, "Perceptions of Political Corruption in Latin American Democracies," *Latin American Politics and Society* 47, no. 3 (2005): 91-111; Eric C. Chang and Yun-han Chu, "Corruption and Trust: Exceptionalism in Asian Democracies," *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006): 259-271; Eric C. Chang and Miriam A. Golden, "Sources of Corruption in Authoritarian Regimes," *Social Science Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2010): 1-20; Stephen D. Morris and Joseph L. Klesner, "Corruption and Trust: Theoretical Considerations and Evidence from Mexico," *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 10 (2010): 1258-1285.

[53] Siqin Kang and Jiangnan Zhu, "Do People Trust the Government More? Unpacking the Distinct Impacts of Anticorruption Policies on Political Trust," *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2021): 434-449.

[54] Hongxia Zhang, Yan Song, Shukui Tan, Shiping Xia, Haitao Zhang, Chuhong Jiang, Ding Xiong, Gupeng Cheng, Lu Zhang, and Yan Lv, "Anti-corruption Efforts, Public Perception of Corruption, and Government Credibility in the Field of Real Estate: An Empirical Analysis Based on Twelve Provinces in China," *Cities* 90 (2019): 64-73.

doing something" to crack down on corruption. An additive index was created from the two ABS IV items concerning respondents' assessments of political corruption at the central and local levels of the Chinese government. The index ranges from 1, indicating the most satisfied, to 8, indicating the least satisfied.

b. Public Perceptions of Implementation of the Rule of Law

The rule of law is considered indispensable in Western-style democracy. Under an authoritarian regime, such as China's, official adoption of the law and legal institutions has also become "the key to the long-term stability and prosperity of the nation."[55] Most Chinese citizens, even those with relatively little legal knowledge, are supportive of the government's stance and policies to promote the rule of law,[56] despite the fact that it is unlikely to fundamentally address the existing problems of the current political system.[57] One might even say that the project of legal construction helps to sustain people's trust in the regime.[58]

In the ABS IV, three questions were used to measure public attitudes toward judicial competence in regulating officials. Several observations can be made from Table 2. First, in terms of evaluation of the law's authority in China, about two-thirds of the respondents believed in the legal system's capacity to punish government officials when they broke the law. In addition, although 36.3% of respondents showed dissatisfaction with the addressing of crime and abuse of authority by officials, an overwhelming majority (79.7%) expressed confidence in judicial capacity to regulate government officials. In general, most respondents expressed satisfaction with and confidence in the court's competence to rein in the CCP's misbehaving government officials. Answers to the three questions regarding perceived judicial competence formed the independent variable of rule of law in this study. All the items were recoded so that higher scores indicate stronger dissatisfaction with current situation of the law-based governance. An additive index (α=0.62) labeled "rule of law" was created, ranging from 1, indicating the most satisfied as to judicial competence, to 12, indicating the least satisfied.

c. Public Perceptions of Social and Economic Inequalities

It is a well-known fact that Reform and Opening-up have led to a sharp rise in social and economic inequality in China. It has been estimated that China's Gini index, a standard measure of income inequality, jumped from 0.31 in

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[55] Albert H. Y. Chen, "Toward a Legal Enlightenment: Discussions in Contemporary China on the Rule of Law," *Pacific Basin Law Journal* 17, no. 2-3 (1999): 138-139.

[56] Ming Yang and Juan Chen, "The Rule of Law in China: If It Has Been Built, Do People Know about It?" *China Review* 9, no. 1 (2009): 123-145.

[57] Young N. Cho, "Law Dissemination Campaign in China: The Origin of Chinese 'Rule of Law' Policy," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 21, no. 2 (2014): 27-44.

[58] Chu, "Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate Over the Chinese Model"; Susan H. Whiting, "Authoritarian 'Rule of Law' and Regime Legitimacy," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 14 (2017): 1907-1940.

1985 to well above 0.50 around 2010,[59] indicating that China has one of the world's highest levels of inequality. Scholars have examined public perception of current social and economic inequality in China, one of whom is Martin King Whyte, who conducted one of the most detailed studies on the subject. Based on a 2004 national survey on inequality and distributive justice, Whyte rejected the conventional wisdom claiming great and pervasive anger toward severe social and economic inequality. Instead, he discovered that most Chinese citizens have "accepted and are busily organizing their lives under the new market principles and heightened inequalities unleashed by China's reforms since 1978."[60] Popular acceptance of market competition, general satisfaction with rapid improvements in living conditions, and expectations for upward mobility largely account for public acceptance of most aspects of the current inequalities in China.

Although many Chinese people seem to warmly embrace current patterns of inequality, prior studies have found a negative effect of perceived inequality on political trust. Using the WVS data over a 12-year period (2001—2012), Hutchison and Xu indicated that individuals living in provinces with higher levels of inequality tended to be less trusting of the government.[61] Other studies have also demonstrated that income inequality is negatively associated with individuals' trust in both central and local governments.[62]

Two items were used in this study to examine how social and economic inequality are perceived and evaluated by Chinese people (see Table 2). When asked to judge the fairness or unfairness of the way in which the government treats its people, a majority of respondents answered affirmatively. Responses to the second question indicated a higher level of resentment toward the widening income gap. Specifically, nearly a third of the respondents held critical views toward the government because it had failed to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. An additive index labeled "inequality" was created, which ranges from 1 to 8, indicating the most and least satisfied evaluations, respectively, of social and economic inequality.

d. Public Perceptions of Governmental Responsiveness

According to Ferejohn, responsiveness is "a measure of how much accountability an institution of structure permits."[63] The ability for citizens to

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[59] Yu Xie and Xiang Zhou, "Income Inequality in Today's China," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 19 (2014): 6928-6933.

[60] Martin Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 197.

[61] Hutchison and Xu, "Trust in China? The Impact of Development, Inequality, and Openness on Political Trust across China's Provinces, 2001—2012."

[62] Zhong and Zhan, "Authoritarian Critical Citizens and Declining Political Trust in China"; Yingnan J. Zhou and Shuai Jin, "Inequality and Political Trust in China: The Social Volcano Thesis Re-examined," *The China Quarterly* 236 (2018): 1033-1062.

[63] John Ferejohn, "Accountability and Authority: Toward Theory of Political," in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, eds. Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 131.

hold their politicians accountable for their actions is considered one of the most important elements of good governance.[64] Although demand for quality of government is less strong in authoritarian regimes than in democratic countries, prior studies have shown that the level of governmental responsiveness is not necessarily determined by the political system. Instead, a democratic country with low economic development can have worse quality of governance than wealthier authoritarian states.[65] In other words, after a certain degree of wealth has been reached, an authoritarian regime like China's is equipped with enough incentive and capacity to improve the quality of government to meet its people's needs.

Previous studies have addressed the Chinese government's efforts to enhance responsiveness and administrative effectiveness. In *Making Autocracy Work*, Truex provided evidence of responsiveness in the National People's Congress (NPC) by measuring the congruence of public preferences and policy proposals laid out by NPC members.[66] Based on an online field experiment measuring the responsiveness of subnational officials to citizen requests, Chen et al. found that almost a third of county governments in China were responsive to citizens' needs and demands related to social welfare.[67] This research also suggested that both the top-down mechanism of oversight and bottom-up citizen engagement serve as useful sources of authoritarian responsiveness.

Earlier studies had confirmed the positive relationship between the sense of governmental responsiveness and political trust. For instance, Tang found that an elevated sense of governmental responsiveness played a more important role in promoting political trust in China than other factors, such as internal efficacy, cultural values, and economic evaluations.[68] A recent work by Huang et al. also indicated that governmental responsiveness was likely to boost institutional trust for people who frequently seek political information online, a result revealing the Chinese government's success in using the Internet and social media to "restructure the government–public relationship by more efficiently and effectively connecting with publics."[69]

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[64] Alicia Adsera, Carles Boix, and Mark Payne, "Are You Being Served? Political Accountability and Quality of Government," *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 19, no. 2 (2003): 445-490.

[65] Nicholas Charron and Victor Lapuente, "Does Democracy Produce Quality of Government?" *European Journal of Political Research* 49, no. 4 (2010): 443-470.

[66] Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[67] Jidong Chen, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu, "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 2 (2016): 383-400.

[68] Tang, "Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability."

[69] Yi-hui Christine Huang, Yuanhang Lu, Christine Hiu Ying Choy, Lang Kao, and Yu-tzung Chang, "How Responsiveness Works in Mainland China: Effects on Institutional Trust and Political Participation," *Public Relations Review* 46, no. 1 (2020), Article 101855.

This study examines the effect of perceived governmental responsiveness on Chinese people's trust in the different levels of government. The item "How well do you think the government responds to what people want?" was used in the ABS IV to gauge public perceptions of governmental responsiveness (rated on a four-point scale ranging from "very responsive" to "not very responsive"). The results presented in Table 2 show that around two-thirds of the respondents (67.9%) were content with the government's capacity to satisfy the public's needs and concerns.

All in all, eight items linked to the above four policy areas—political corruption, implementing the project of legal construction, narrowing the social and economic gap, and governmental responsiveness—were used as independent variables of perceived governmental performance. Chinese people are moderately positive about governmental performance in general. Specifically, mean scores for all eight items were around the "so-so" level (or point 2.8, see Table 2). The court's inability to punish officials behaving illegally was one of the items with a mean score below that level, indicating pessimistic attitudes among the Chinese public toward the weakness and ineffectiveness of the court against CCP leaders and administrative officials. Assessment of the corruption situation at local levels of government also had a low mean score, which is consistent with previous studies indicating that Chinese people's level of satisfaction with governance tends to drop as the government gets closer to ordinary people.[70]

3. Explaining Hierarchical Trust: Multivariate Analysis

This section examines public attitudes toward the regime by exploring how public evaluations of governmental performance and political culture affect political support in China. Particular focus is given to the importance of political culture as a mediating variable between governmental performance and political support. In the paragraphs that follow, dependent, independent, and control variables are listed, followed by the results of the multivariate analyses.

3.1 Dependent Variables

The ABS IV asked respondents about their levels of trust in the courts, national government, NPC, civil service, People's Liberation Army, police, local government, newspapers, television, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on a four-point scale ranging from "none at all" to "a great deal of trust." Levels of trust in national government and local government were used as dependent variables.

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[70] Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

3.2 Independent Variables

This research covered two sets of independent variables: the first included evaluations of government performance, including political corruption, the rule of law, the social and economic gap, and governmental responsiveness. The second included respondents' preferences for traditional political culture, including traditional, authoritarian, and paternalistic values. To examine the potential mediating effect of political culture, the variables of traditional, authoritarian, and paternalistic values were interacted with perceived government-performance variables to see if negative evaluations of governmental performance were less destructive among the cultural values. If the factor of preference for Chinese political culture were to neutralize the corrosive effect of discontent with government performance, the coefficients of the interactive variable would be positive.

3.3 Control Variables

Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics—age, sex, education, and self-evaluated social status[71]—were controlled for. The model also included two media-exposure variables: frequency of following political news and frequency of receiving political news through the Internet. Four variables that assessed respondents' psychological involvement in politics were used in this analysis: interpersonal trust, political interest, internal political efficacy, and political fear (see Appendix for an overview of the variables). Finally, it is worth mentioning that two items—personal experience of witnessing political corruption and confidence in the government's capacity to eliminate corruption—were added as controls in the model, using the perceived-corruption situation as the key independent variable (see Table 3). The results of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions are presented in Tables 3—6. To avoid multicollinearity, variables for government performance and political culture were standardized prior to the formation of the interaction terms. The other entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses below.

3.4 Results

The main findings were as follows. First, the results indicate that political culture is positively related to central and local trust across all models, with only one exception, which means that respondents who show a stronger preference for traditional, authoritarian, or paternalistic values are more likely to express support for government institutions, meaning H1 is supported. Furthermore, the results showed that there was a significant negative relationship between discontent with governmental performance and central and local political trust

[71] Although family income is considered an important factor in influencing perception of governmental performance, self-evaluated social status was used instead, because of the high rates of missing income data.

Table 3. Multiple Regression of the Impact of Perceived Corruption Situation and Political culture on Chinese Citizens' Central and Local Trust

	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust
Political performances						
Negative Evaluation of corruption situation	-0.06 (0.01)***	-0.16 (0.01)***	-0.06 (0.01)***	-0.20 (0.02)***	-0.05 (0.01)***	-0.20 (0.02)***
Political culture						
Traditionalism	0.10 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.02)				
Authoritarianism			0.05 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.02)*		
Paternalism					0.10 (0.01)***	0.08 (0.02)***
Interactive variables						
Corruption×traditionalism	0.03 (0.01)**	0.02 (0.01)				
Corruption×authoritarianism			0.04 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)		
Corruption×Paternalism					0.04 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)
Corruption related variables						
Government's capability to eliminate corruption	0.10 (0.02)***	0.14 (0.02)***	0.11 (0.02)**	0.13 (0.02)***	0.10 (0.02)***	0.14 (0.02)***
Experience of witnessing corruption	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.25 (0.04)***	-0.05 (0.02)*	-0.23 (0.04)***	-0.05 (0.03)*	-0.20 (0.04)***
Demographic and socioeconomic factors						
Age	0.02 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.02)
Gender	0.08 (0.03)***	0.01 (0.03)	0.09 (0.03)***	0.02 (0.03)	0.06 (0.02)**	0.01 (0.03)
Education	-0.04 (0.05)	0.01 (0.07)**	-0.01(0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.07)**
Self-evaluated social status	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)***	0.01(0.02)	0.03 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)***
N=	2503	2541	2484	2526	2503	2531
Constant	2.60 (0.11)***	1.82 (0.13)***	2.50 (0.12)***	1.81 (0.13)***	2.87 (0.11)***	1.81 (0.1)***
Pseudo R2=	0.18	0.16	0.17	0.17	0.18	0.17

Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.

Note: * Robust standard errors are in parentheses. To save space, coefficients for media exposure and psychological involvement are not presented here (available upon request).
*p<.1. **p<.05. ***p<.001.

Table 4. Multiple Regression of the Impact of Perceived Implementation of the Rule of Law and Political Culture on Chinese Citizens' Central and Local Trust

	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust
Political performances						
Negative evaluation of the implementation of the rule of law	-0.09 (0.01)***	-0.17 (0.02)***	-0.11 (0.01)***	-0.22 (0.02)***	-0.08 (0.01)***	-0.16 (0.02)***
Political culture						
Traditionalism	0.02 (0.01)*	0.04 (0.02)**				
Authoritarianism			0.07 (0.01)***	0.05 (0.02)***		
Paternalism					0.11 (0.01)***	0.08 (0.02)***
Interactive variables						
Rule of law×traditionalism	0.04 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)**				
Rule of law×authoritarianism			0.02 (0.01)*	-0.03 (0.01)**		
Rule of law×Paternalism					0.03 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)
Demographic and socioeconomic factors						
Age	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Gender	0.07 (0.07)***	-0.02 (0.03)	0.10 (0.03)***	-0.02 (0.03)	0.07 (0.03)**	-0.01 (0.10)
Education	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.03)
Self-evaluated social status	0.02 (0.01)**	0.05 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)**	0.04 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)**	0.02 (0.03)**
N=	2905	2959	2884	2945	2893	2945
Constant	2.93 (0.11)***	2.28 (0.11)***	2.83 (0.09)***	2.25 (0.14)***	2.84 (0.11)***	2.24 (0.15)***
Pseudo R2=	0.18	0.14	0.17	0.15	0.18	0.14

Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.

Note: * Robust standard errors are in parentheses. To save space, coefficients for media exposure and psychological involvement are not presented here (available upon request).
*p<.1. **p<.05. ***p<.001.

Table 5. Multiple Regression of the Impact of Perceived Social and Economic Inequality and Political Culture on Chinese Citizens' Central and Local Trust

	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust
Political performances						
Negative evaluation of social and economic inequality	-0.08 (0.01)***	-0.17 (0.01)***	-0.08 (0.01)***	-0.13 (0.02)***	-0.07 (0.01)***	-0.16 (0.01)***
Political culture						
Traditionalism	0.04 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)				
Authoritarianism			0.06 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.02)		
Paternalism					0.12 (0.01)***	0.09 (0.02)***
Interactive variables						
Inequality×traditionalism	0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)				
Inequality×authoritarianism			0.02 (0.01)*	-0.02 (0.01)		
Inequality×Paternalism					0.03 (0.01)**	-0.02 (0.01)**
Demographic and socioeconomic factors						
Age	0.01 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)
Gender	0.08 (0.02)***	-0.04 (0.03)	0.09 (0.02)***	-0.01 (0.03)	0.07 (0.02)**	-0.03 (0.03)
Education	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)*	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**
Self-evaluated social status	0.01 (0.01)**	0.04 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)**	0.04 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)***
N=	2974	3022	2945	2992	2953	3001
Constant	2.85 (0.09)***	2.06 (0.11)***	2.76 (0.10)***	2.05 (0.12)***	2.77 (0.09)***	2.05 (0.11)***
Pseudo R2=	0.16	0.10	0.15	0.10	0.16	0.10

Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.

Note: * Robust standard errors are in parentheses. To save space, coefficients for media exposure and psychological involvement are not presented here (available upon request).
*p<.1. **p<.05. ***p<.001.

Table 6. Multiple Regression of the Impact of Perceived Governmental Responsiveness and Political Culture on Chinese Citizens' Central and Local Trust

	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust	Central trust	Local trust
Political performances						
Negative evaluation of governmental responsiveness	-0.10 (0.01)***	-0.20 (0.01)***	-0.09 (0.01)***	-0.19 (0.01)***	-0.08 (0.01)***	-0.20 (0.01)***
Political culture						
Traditionalism	0.05 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)				
Authoritarianism			0.04 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.05)		
Paternalism					0.12 (0.01)***	0.10 (0.02)***
Interactive variables						
Responsiveness×traditionalism	0.03 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.01)				
Responsiveness×authoritarianism			0.02 (0.01)*	-0.01 (0.01)		
Responsiveness×Paternalism					0.03 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)
Demographic and socioeconomic factors						
Age	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)
Gender	0.07 (0.02)**	-0.04 (0.03)	0.08 (0.02)**	-0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.02)**	-0.03 (0.03)
Education	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)*	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)*
Self-evaluated social status	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)*	0.03 (0.02)***	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)*
N=	2731	2776	2713	2759	2725	2770
Constant	2.93 (0.09)***	2.32 (0.11)***	2.85 (0.10)***	2.36 (0.12)***	2.84 (0.79)***	2.22 (0.11)***
Pseudo R2=	0.18	0.14	0.16	0.14	0.18	0.15

Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. To save space, coefficients for media exposure and psychological involvement are not presented here (available upon request).

* $p<.1$. ** $p<.05$. *** $p<.001$

across all models, which supports H2. These findings are consistent with the many previous studies showing that people who express dissatisfaction with governmental performance are more likely to have a lower level of institutional trust.

Next, the potential mediating effect of traditional Chinese political culture was examined. The results showed robust support for the argument that the negative evaluation of governmental performance has less of a negative effect on institutional trust among respondents who have a stronger preference for traditional political culture. Specifically, the interactive variables were positively related to central trust in all models, with only one exception, indicating that preference for traditionalism does not have a significant impact in lessening the negative effect of public dissatisfaction with social and economic inequalities on central trust (see Table 5). On the other hand, there was either a negative relationship or no statistically significant relationship between the interactive items and local trust in all models, which indicates that attachment to traditional norms failed to mitigate the negative assessments of governance on trust in provincial governments. As such, H3 is supported by these results.

Other significant findings from Tables 3—6 are as follows. First, regarding media-exposure variables, while the consumption of political news had a positive effect on central trust in only a few models, exposure to the Internet was significantly negatively associated with the level of institutional trust across most models. Although scholars have expressed concern that consuming news that is strictly regulated by the authorities might nurture a supportive sentiment toward the government among Chinese people,[72] this result indicates that Internet users are less likely to be influenced by the state and conventional media and more likely to be critical of the party-state in China.

Second, among the psychological involvement variables, levels of interpersonal and political interest had a significantly positive impact on central and local trust across most models. Political fear, on the other hand, had a strong negative impact on institutional trust in most models. These results are consistent with conventional wisdom.

Third, concerning demographic and socioeconomic variables, the results showed that the level of institutional trust was tied to certain population segments in most models—specifically, older males with higher self-evaluated social status. In addition, education level was shown to be positively related with central trust, but negatively associated with local trust, but the results are inconsistent across the models.

In conclusion, after the explanatory power of all the variables had been taken into account, the interaction effect of cultural values and perceived

[72] Haiyang Lu, Peishan Tong, and Rong Zhu, "Does Internet Use Affect Netizens' Trust in Government? Empirical Evidence from China," *Social Indicators Research* 149 (2020): 167-185.

governmental performance still exerted a positive impact on the level of central trust. Meanwhile, the interactive variables between political culture and perceived governmental performance had no visible effect on local trust. This strongly supports this paper's general argument that the hierarchical trust pattern observed in China is fundamentally structured by public attachment to traditional political culture. In short, cultural values help sustain hierarchical government trust in China.

Why then does deference to traditional culture neutralize the negative impact of discontent with governmental performance on public trust in central but not local authorities? First, China's political system has been highly centralized for centuries. Accordingly, the central government is the major decision maker, while local governments act as dispatchers and executors of the former's policies. Hence, while most people lack the access necessary to understand how the national government functions and formulates policies, more frequent and direct interactions with local levels of government make it easier for people to evaluate their performance. As such, while trust in the central government is derived largely from attachment to traditional culture that emphasizes deference to omnipotent and benevolent authorities, local trust is more dependent on public assessment of government performance.

Second, as the frequently quoted proverb "Decrees can never go beyond the walls of Zhongnanhai" (政令不出中南海, *zhengling buchu zhongnanhai*) implies, the public tends to blame local governments rather than the central leadership for unsatisfying implementation of certain policies. In other words, deeply rooted cultural traditions allow people to sanctify central leaders and divert their discontent to local governments. Although some might argue that the phenomenon by which central leaders are trusted more than local leaders should be attributed to institutional design and propaganda campaigns that deliberately strengthen the central government's authority,[73] the hierarchical trust pattern could not have developed were it not for people's belief in and attachment to central authorities.

4. Concluding Remarks

Building on studies that have documented the far-reaching negative effects of government performance on Chinese citizens' attitudes toward their governments, this study sheds light on the roles of traditional values in the relationship between perceptions of governance and citizens' trust in main

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[73] Su et al., "Constructed Hierarchical Government Trust in China: Formation Mechanism and Political Effects."

[74] Chen, "Local Distrust and Regime Support: Sources and Effects of Political Trust in China"; Li, "Reassessing Trust in the Central Government: Evidence from Five National Surveys."

[75] Cary Wu et al., "Chinese Citizen Satisfaction with Government Performance during COVID-19," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30 (2021): 930-944.

political institutions. This study found robust evidence that the contextual factor of political culture in China neutralizes the negative impact of unsatisfying government performance on citizens' trust in the national government. In other words, Chinese citizens who are deeply attached to traditional cultural values tend to support the central government, despite their discontent with the quality of its performance.

More importantly, this study provides evidence for the hypothesis that preference for traditional values contributes to China's special local–central government trust pattern. Specifically, attachment to traditional, authoritarian, and paternalistic values significantly weakens the link between unsatisfying government performance and loss of central trust, but rarely has the same effect on the level of local trust.

These findings have important implications. Prior research has indicated that varying extents of trust actually reflect declining trust in central authorities.[74] However, this study shows that Chinese people's dissatisfaction with governance has not "spilled over" from local officials to the central government, because of the cushioning effect of traditional political culture.

[76] Shi, "The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan."

Appendix. Variable Description and Summary Statistics

Variable	Description	Min-Max	Mean	SD	N
Dependent variables					
Central trust	Central trust is measured by the item “How much trust do you have in the national government?” on a four-point scale ranging from “none at all” to “a great deal of trust.”	1-4	3.34	0.58	3695
Local trust	Local trust is measured by the item “How much trust do you have in the local government?” on a four-point scale ranging from “none at all” to “a great deal of trust.”	1-4	2.74	0.71	3741
Independent variables					
Preference for Chinese political culture	See Tables 1-2 for detailes.				
Evaluation of governmental performance					
Control variables					
Age	Measured in number of years	18-95	49.26	16.31	4068
Gender	Males (1); Females (0)	0-1	0.49	0.50	4068
Education	Measured in number of years of education	0-22	7.25	4.63	4034
Self-evaluated social status	The ABS IV asked respondents to access their families’ socioeconomic status on a ten-point scale, 1 being the lowest status, and 10 the highest.	1-10	5.10	2.06	3645
Exposure to political news	The ABS IV asked the respondents how often did they follow news about politics on a five-point scale from “practically never” to “everyday.”	1-5	2.51	1.62	4025
Internet use	The frequency of Internet use is measured by the item "How often do you use the Internet including social media networks to find information about politics and government?" on a six-point scale from “practically never” to “everyday.”	0-5	1.02	1.83	4042

Appendix. Variable Description and Summary Statistics

Variable	Description	Min-Max	Mean	SD	N
Interpersonal trust	Interpersonal trust is measured by the item "Generally speaking, would you say you agree with that statement that 'most people are trustworthy?'" on a four-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."	1-4	2.92	0.55	3937
Political interest	Political interest is measured by the item "How interested would you say you are in politics?" on a four-point scale ranging from "not at all interested" to "very interest."	1-4	2.82	0.88	3958
Internal political efficacy	The three following items are used to measure internal efficacy: "I think I have the ability to participate in politics," "Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on," and "People like me don't have any influence over what the government does" (each statement was asked on a four-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree.") Political efficacy is an additive index (α=.72).	1-12	6.60	1.28	3755
Political fear	Political fear is measured by the item "People are free to speak what they think without fear" on a four-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strong agree."	1-4	2.14	0.64	3613
Capability to eliminate corruption	The ABS IV asked the respondents to what extent did they think that "the government is working to crack down on corruption and root out bribery" on a four-point scale ranging from "doing nothing" to "doing its best."	1-4	3.15	0.61	3513
Experience of witnessing corruption	The ABS IV asked the respondents to recall whether they have personally witnessed an act of corruption or bribe-taking by a politician or government official in the past year.Witnessed or heard (1); Never witnessed or heard (0).	0-1	0.18	0.39	3628

Source: Asian Barometer Survey IV.