

Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China: Culture, Mobilization, or Performance?¹

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While democratic countries have been concerned about a “trust crisis” since the 1960s, China surprisingly displays a very high level of public trust in institutions. Why do people trust institutions and to what extent does institutional trust in China differ from that in democracies? Using the 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey, this article explores three different dimensions of institutional trust in China: trust in administrative institutions, trust in legal institutions, and trust in societal institutions. The analysis shows that institutional trust is more than a product of traditional values in China. Rather, it is more of an individual rational choice based heavily on the evaluations of the institutional performance, and it is also a result of government-controlled politicization. Trust in administrative institutions, in particular, mainly comes from satisfactory institutional performance. Institutional trust has a great impact on the development of democracy and legal participation in China.

Key words: China, institutional performance, institutional trust, political culture, survey study

Political Trust in Democratic and Authoritarian Societies

Trust in political institutions is important for the successful functioning of democracy. Linking micro-level citizens to macro-level political institutions, public trust in various institutions ensures that government operates effectively, making decisions without resorting to coercion and retaining a certain leeway in times of insufficient short-term performance (Easton, 1965; Gamson, 1968; Mishler & Rose, 1997).

However, democratic countries have been concerned about a “trust crisis” since the 1960s. Survey data show a general trend of declining trust in institutions across democratic countries and a very low level of trust in new democracies.² As the erosion of trust has become a “continuing feature of contemporary

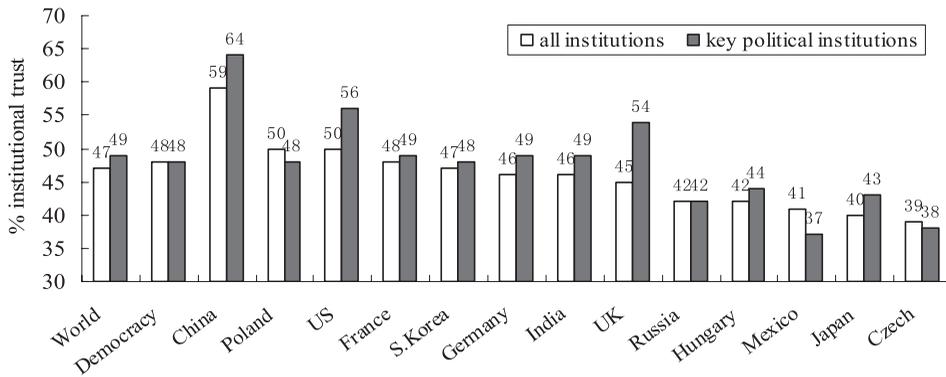


Figure 1. Trust in institutions by country, 2000

Source: 2000 World Values Survey.

democratic politics," the origins and consequences of trust in institutions have aroused much interest and debate (Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Dalton, 1999, p. 68; Norris, 1999; Warren, 1999).

In contrast, while people outside of China often assume that the Chinese government lacks political support, China has maintained a consistently high level of political trust and support since 1995 (Chen, 2004). The 2000 World Values Survey (WVS) shows that the average levels of public trust in all 17 political institutions, as well as in the five key institutions, are higher in China than the world averages and most democracies (see Figure 1).³ The contrast triggers some interesting questions: Are the high levels of trust in institutions in China comparable to those in democratic societies? Why do people trust institutions in China?

Two major explanations for trust in institutions are cultural theories and institutional theories. Cultural theories argue that institutional trust has its origins in political culture. Values and attitudes play an independent role in shaping institutional trust (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1999; Putnam, 1993). Institutional explanations hold that trust in institutions is based on people's evaluations of the incumbent performance and calculations of the material gains (Easton, 1965; Mishler & Rose, 1997). Most current studies on political trust have been based on these two competing theories.

In the debate between the above major theories, previous studies on China seem to emphasize the role of traditional hierarchically oriented values. Using 1993 survey data in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, Shi (2001) concludes that compared with traditional political culture, government performance plays a less important role in political trust in Taiwan, and yet an even weaker role in the PRC. Another study based on surveys in urban Beijing between 1995 and 1999 reports only a weak association between government performance and political support, for which institutional trust is one indicator in the analysis (Chen, 2004).⁴

The previous studies have shed light on the sources of trust in institutions in China. Yet, some important mechanisms influencing the trust in authoritarian societies have been left out of the current discussion: the government-controlled

mobilization process and the modernization process that creates “critical citizens” (Norris, 1999). Moreover, the previous studies remain inconclusive about the role of performance.

This article reexamines the sources of public trust in political institutions in China. In addition to the 2000 WVS, we draw heavily on the 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey (CVES, *Zhongguo Gongmin Sixiang Daode Guannian Zhuangkuang Diaocha*).⁵ This survey contains a national random sample of 7,714 respondents in 200 townships and urban neighborhoods located in 100 counties and urban districts. It includes a wide range of questions related to the respondents’ social and political attitudes and behavior, including their attitudes toward various political institutions. A distinct feature of the 2004 survey is the use of the spatial sampling method.⁶ This method enables us to include the large migrant population, which has been difficult to capture in the traditional sampling method based on household registrations.

We will first discuss the major institutions included in the study and identify the general pattern and types of trust in institutions in China. The second part will examine the different sources of trust in institutions. Results from this analysis show that trust in institutions in China is not only a product of traditional hierarchical values. Rather, it is both a product of government propaganda and political education, and most importantly, an individual rational choice based heavily on institutional performance—especially the subjective evaluation of the performance.

Patterns of Institutional Trust in China

Trust in political institutions is often referred to as “institutional trust” in the literature on political trust and regime support (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Rohrschneider & Schmitt-Beck, 2002).⁷ Political trust is a multidimensional phenomenon (Dalton, 1999; Klingemann, 1999). Dalton (1999) classifies political trust and support into five categories: trust for political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions, and political actors. It is necessary to distinguish between these categories as there are “significant theoretical and empirical gradations within different parts of the regime” (Norris, 1999, pp. 9–13). For instance, a person can strongly identify with her political community but not with the current regime principles, or a citizen may trust political institutions but not political actors.

The distinction between different categories of political support is essential in the discussion of political trust. Researchers may reach different conclusions about trust as a result of using distinct definitions of political support (Rohrschneider & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Warren, 1999).⁸ As Norris (1999, p. 13) observes, the confusion in the literature between those who find a declining pattern and those who see only random fluctuations of political support mainly comes from the reliance on different indicators at different levels of political support.

To avoid the confusion caused by overgeneralized terms and undefined concepts, this article focuses on the institutional dimension of political support and measures political trust by popular trust in various public institutions. Specifically, we used the following question in the 2004 survey: “To what extent do you

trust these public institutions: a great deal (3), quite a lot (2), not very much (1), or none at all (0)?" The respondents were asked to assess their levels of trust in 13 such institutions: government, communist party, village council/work unit, public security organs, procuratorates, the people's congress, courts, legal defense, consumers' association, media, women's federation, labor union, and complaints bureau. This list transcends the previous studies, which measure trust in institutions only by people's trust in and support for the current regime (Shi, 2001).

Political Institutions in China

In this section, we provide further details about the 13 political institutions included in the 2004 survey.

The *government* is the central executive bureaucracy of the political apparatus. The *Chinese Communist Party (CCP)* is a distinct institution from the government in principle, but their structures are often parallel at various levels and their roles are interconnected in reality (Manion, 1999).

The *village council/work unit* has the closest and most direct linkage with ordinary citizens in China. For the government, village council/work unit also serves an important function of political control and political campaigns.

Public security is an essential component of the state security system (Lieberthal, 1995). It is a judicial organ responsible for criminal investigations and an important administrative arm in charge of daily political and social security affairs.

The *procuratorates* serve as a bridge between the public security and the courts through overseeing criminal investigations, reviewing cases, and supervising court trials. Manion (1999) noted that the most important role of the procuratorates has been "investigation and prosecution of official corruption" (p. 430). Thus, many perceive the procuratorates more as a political institution despite their judicial responsibilities.⁹

The *people's congress* lies at the center of the legislative process in China. The National People's Congress encompasses constitutional enacting and amendment powers, law enacting, legislative supervision, and other legislative powers.

The *people's courts* have judicial authority and represent the main trial organ in China. The *legal profession or legal defense* (i.e., lawyers) provides legal services to the society. The increasing number of disputes brought by the economic reform creates further need for legal services.¹⁰

The *consumers' association* is an institution that legally protects consumers' interests by means of supervision of services and commodities. As consumers' associations are particularly useful in supporting "the infringed consumers in making lawsuits on violations of consumers' interests" (China Society for Human Rights Studies, 2006, n.p.), they are often perceived and trusted as a legal institution despite many of its social functions.

The *media* is an increasingly powerful institution in China. The media, especially its new forms, such as Internet and newspapers, plays important roles in representing public opinion, debating social issues, and monitoring the local government.

The *women's federation* aims to represent and protect women's rights and interests. It promotes women's participation and socioeconomic opportunities, and provides various services and assistance in cases such as domestic violence.

The major functions of *All-China Federation of Trade Unions* and its local organizations include protecting interests and rights of workers, mobilizing and organizing the workers, and representing workers in the administration.

Complaints bureaus handle complaints received through letters, visits, phone calls, and e-mails from ordinary Chinese citizens (Thireau & Hua, 2003). These complaints range from labor grievances to corruption and pollution.

Types of Institutional Trust

We use factor analysis to sort out the relationships among the 13 institutions. Factor analysis is a statistical method that examines the correlation matrix among several variables. It identifies and then groups the highly correlated variables into factors. If the 13 institutions are highly correlated with each other, factor analysis would generate a single factor, which would be our measure of institutional trust. If, however, some institutions are more closely related than others, factor analysis would generate more than one factor, grouping the 13 institutions by how strongly they are correlated with each other.

In Table 1, factor analysis examines the internal correlations of the 13 institutions and tells us that they belong to three groups or factors. The first group includes the government, the CCP, the village council/work unit, the public security forces, and the public prosecutor's office. These are the key institutions

Table 1. Rotated Factor Analysis of Institutional Trust in China

	Trust in administrative institutions	Trust in legal institutions	Trust in societal institutions
Government	0.65	0.33	0.33
CCP	0.45	0.36	0.20
Public security forces	0.55	0.39	0.37
Village council/ work unit	0.44	0.22	0.26
Procuratorate	0.55	0.53	0.32
People's congress	0.38	0.60	0.25
Court	0.32	0.66	0.23
Legal defense	0.25	0.50	0.40
Consumers' association	0.14	0.40	0.33
Complaints bureau	0.37	0.40	0.44
Labor union	0.44	0.27	0.55
Media	0.26	0.23	0.62
Women's federation	0.38	0.30	0.61
Eigenvalue ¹¹	2.29	2.30	1.98
Variance explained	35.90	36.05	31.03

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

of the state and carry mostly the regime's administrative functions. In the following pages, we will describe the trust in these institutions as *administrative trust*. On the surface, public security and public prosecution seem to belong to the legal sector. Yet, they are highly correlated with other administrative institutions and thus are part of the state's administrative arm. The second group seems to be the institutions in the legal branch, including the people's congress, the court, legal defense, and the consumers' association. The fact that the consumers' association is highly correlated with the other legal institutions indicates that it carries mostly legal functions related to both the legislature (people's congress) and the court. We will refer to trust in this second group of institutions as *legal trust*. The third group of institutions in Table 1 contains complaints bureaus, the labor union, the media, and the women's federation. This set of institutions mainly works with social and civic affairs that are more directly related to ordinary citizens. For lack of a better term, we will refer to trust in this group of institutions as *societal trust*.

The three types of institutional trust identified above—administrative, legal, and societal—are classified according to their different functions. In the following sections, we will first compare the levels of trust in different institutions and then identify the sources of the three types of institutional trust.

Levels of Institutional Trust

We use data from the 2004 CVES to examine the levels of trust in the above institutions. A striking feature of institutional trust in China is the high level across different indicators. The average trust score in the 13 institutions is 73 out of 100, which is fairly high and consistent with the results from the 2000 WVS.¹² Across all institutions, the vast majority of people (an average of 87%) trust the institutions; among them, a large proportion (41%) trusts the institutions a great deal.

However, there may be a possibility that the high level is produced by survey respondents' political fear (i.e., respondents may give false responses or choose not to answer for fear of possible persecution). This is a general concern for survey methods in nondemocratic societies, especially for politically sensitive questions (Ren, 2009). We adopt three methods to test the validity of the measurement.

The first test addresses the "don't know" answers in the survey by comparing the rate of nonresponse in the 2004 CVES with that of the 2000 WVS. Studies show that respondents often refuse to answer or answer "don't know" to conceal their true opinion (Ren, 2009; Shi, 2001); if this is the case, the 2004 survey's level of nonresponse should be high. However, the actual average nonresponse level for the common institutions in the 2004 survey is lower than China's level in the 2000 WVS, and China's nonresponse level in the 2000 WVS is lower or comparable to that of the major democratic countries (details not shown).

Our second test examines the external validity of "institutional trust" measurement. It compares the institutional trust score with the means by which people actually resolve disputes (see Shi, 2001). In the 2004 survey, respondents are asked to identify the means they have used or will use when they have financial,

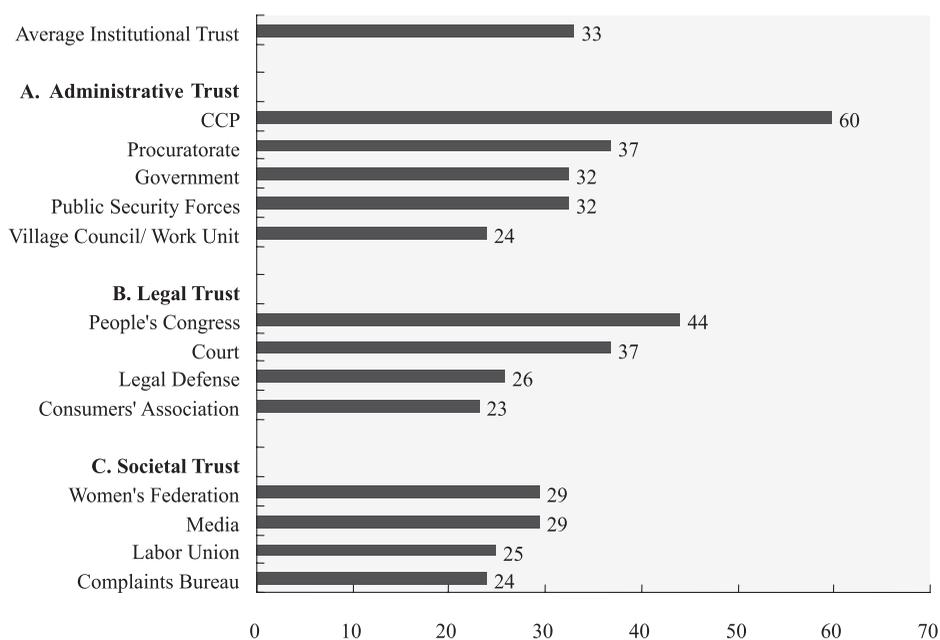


Figure 2. Institutional trust thermometer in China (% weighted), 2004

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

Notes: The calculation of the trust score is based on the following question: "How much do you trust the following institutions: a great deal, somewhat, not very much, or not at all?" "Trusting a great deal" is coded as 1, and 0 otherwise. The trust score is the percentage of respondents who trust institutions "a great deal."

civil, or administrative disputes. If the respondents give false trust scores out of political fear, there will be an inconsistency between the institutional trust scores and the actual means they use (i.e., they may report themselves as trusting institutions yet may not use institutional means to solve problems in reality). However, in a separate analysis (results not shown), institutional trust and institutional means for conflict resolution are significantly and positively related after controlling for socioeconomic factors. Again, the results partly confirm the validity of the measurement of institutional trust.

The third test is to control for political fear in multivariate analysis. In the 2004 CVES, there is one question that may serve as a measure of political fear: the presence of the third party in the interview besides the interviewer and interviewee. As will be demonstrated in the section of multivariate analysis, the relationship analyzed here remains robust after controlling the fear factors.

Another finding about the level of institutional trust is the distinction between the different types of institutional trust. Figure 2 shows the pattern of institutional trust in China. We ask whether the respondents trust the 13 institutions "a great deal."¹³ Comparing the three types of trust, we find two major differences. First, overall, public trust is the highest (with an average of 37%) in the five administrative institutions and the lowest (with an average of 27%) in the four

societal institutions. The trust level in legal institutions stands in the middle (33%). Noticeably, the CCP enjoys an extremely high level of trust (about 60% of people trust the CCP a great deal), a level that is much higher than that of all other institutions. Also, trust in the people's congress is high (44%) compared with other institutions. Second, the variation in administrative trust is large, ranging from 24% (village council/work unit) to 60% (CCP); the variation in legal trust is modest, ranging from 23% (consumers' association) to 44% (people's congress); meanwhile, trust in societal institutions is relatively stable across institutions (ranging from 24% to 29%). This is not surprising since the four societal institutions are functionally very similar.

Explaining Institutional Trust in China

Sources of Institutional Trust

Although the overall trust score is high, attitudes vary with individuals. This section studies the possible predictors for institutional trust and examines their relative importance. Specifically, we study the impact of modernization, political mobilization, cultural values, and institutional performance on institutional trust in China.

Modernization Current debate has focused on the relative importance of institutional performance and values; yet surprisingly, modernization and political mobilization, two important processes that work against each other in authoritarian societies, are often neglected in explaining institutional trust.

People can be made more independent or become modern "critical citizens" as a result of modernization. By helping people form their independent opinions through a series of economic and sociopolitical resistance factors, such as income, education, and urban experience, modernization works against the mobilization process that turns people into passive accepters (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). These resistance factors allow for independent and critical thinking, leading to reduced trust in political institutions.

The impact of education on trust in institutions, however, is complicated. As a standard indicator of modernization, education encourages independent thinking and decreases trust in institutions. Meanwhile, education is state controlled in China, and political education is part of the education program, which may increase trust in institutions. We will discuss this further in the multivariate analysis section.

Political Mobilization The mobilization process mainly refers to the massive influence of government-controlled political propaganda and political education in today's China. The process plays a particularly important role in shaping people's minds in authoritarian societies. The mobilization and modernization processes are expected to work in opposite directions in China in affecting people's institutional trust.

Mobilization increases people's institutional trust. Through media control or political education, authoritarian governments use propaganda to promote regime legitimacy and discourage criticism. The state limits public access to

alternative sources of information. Political mobilization was most intensive in socialist years; yet even today, political meetings are held regularly in work units and schools, where people get together and study the latest documents issued by the central government and the party. One example is the CCP's nationwide campaign to preserve the "progressiveness" of the party members (*baoxian*). Exposure to political communication promotes popular acceptance for the mainstream political norms embedded in the communication (Chan, 1997; Geddes & Zaller, 1989; Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979; Patterson, 1999). Thus, we expect that in contrast to the situation in democratic countries, factors such as media exposure and interest in politics, make people susceptible to regime influence and promote institutional trust.

Cultural Values Almond and Verba (1963) argue that values and norms play an independent role in the formation of political trust. People may react to the same stimuli differently because of different values they assign to events (Inglehart, 1999; Shi, 2001). This is likely to be the case in China, where traditional ideas still have a deep impact. At the aggregate level, these values and norms distinguish China from other societies, influencing China's level of institutional trust as a whole. At the individual level, Chinese people vary greatly in their personal values and orientations.

This article focuses on two important values and attitudes. The first one is attitudes toward hierarchy. Confucianism emphasizes deference to authority and hierarchy, which promotes Chinese people's trust level as a whole (Shi, 2001). However, Chinese people identify with Confucianism to varying extents, contributing to the variation of institutional trust within China.

Interpersonal trust is another possible source of institutional trust. Putnam (1993) finds that social capital is important for democracy. People who trust each other tend to cooperate with each other in institutions, making institutions function more smoothly. Thus, trust toward fellow citizens tends to create or promote people's trust in institutions. However, others have argued that social capital based on interpersonal trust may not translate into institutional trust. Empirical support for the relationship between interpersonal trust and institutional trust has been mixed. Some report significant relationships, while others find no consistent association, concluding that they are two different things (Kaase, 1997; Newton, 1999).

Institutional Performance Institutional theories emphasize the rational side of institutional trust. Citizens trust institutions based on their assessment of economic and political performance of the institutions. Institutions that carry out their functions satisfactorily encourage trust from citizens, and those that do not invite distrust. Trustworthiness of institutions generates public trust and confidence (Brennan, 1998; Hetherington, 1998; Jennings, 1998; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Rogowski, 1974). Performance of institutions at the local level plays a particularly important role in influencing people's trust since it is most visible and has the greatest impact on people's real lives.

However, current studies on China have not provided strong support for the role of performance in shaping people's institutional trust. A research based on survey data from 1995 and 1999 fails to find the effect of individual satisfaction of

one's material and social life and assessment of local policies (Chen, 2004). Also, an important comparative study on the PRC and Taiwan finds that the bases of political trust in both places are still less legal-rational than traditional, especially in the PRC (Shi, 2001). Thus, it is necessary to revisit the influence of institutional performance.

With the latest survey data to account for possible changes in political dynamics, this study also differs from the existing works on China in the following ways. First, this study focuses on the institutional dimension of political trust. As argued earlier, it is important to differentiate between different dimensions of political trust. Researchers may reach different conclusions based on the different measures and dimensions of political trust. Second, as the 2004 CVES data set is among the first national samples to include the large migrant population that has been neglected in previous survey studies in China, this article can serve as a test for the results of some previous fieldwork limited to certain places and groups.¹⁴ Third, instead of measuring regime performance with very general indicators, the article includes different aspects of performance to better capture the effect of institutional performance on institutional trust.¹⁵ It distinguishes between political and economic performance. To explain institutional trust, it is necessary to include both economic and political performances. On the one hand, people trust an institution depending on its policy performance, especially economic performance. On the other hand, political performance is particularly important, especially in developing countries where fairness and corruption are serious issues (Mishler & Rose, 1997). As Li (2004) observes, most Chinese villagers distinguish between different levels of government. Our measures of performance also represent performance at different levels: the most immediate levels like work unit or village council and the intermediate level of city or county performance. The above aspects of performance may have different effects on institutional trust.

Multivariate Analysis of Trust in Institutions in China

So far we have hypothesized four possible explanations for levels of institutional trust: modernization, mobilization, cultural values, and evaluation of institutional performance. This section will combine these different explanations and test them in a multivariate analysis.

Measurement

As discussed in the previous section, institutional trust, the major dependent variable, is measured by its three dimensions: *trust in administrative institutions*, *trust in legal institutions*, and *trust in societal institutions*. In the multivariate regression analysis, we use the factor scores for the three types of institutional trust.

Modernization is measured by two groups of variables. The first group of variables captures the respondents' economic status. *Family Income (logged)* is the logged value of the family income of respondents in 2003. *Unemployment* measures whether the respondents are unemployed at the time of the survey. Also, *men* generally enjoy higher economic status than women in China. The second group of variables measures the respondents' social and political status. *Level of*

political information/legal knowledge is measured by respondents' ability to name two basic rights and two basic duties of citizens in the constitution, and the ability to tell the validity of 11 statements from the constitution and laws, forming a 0–4 and 0–11 scale index. *Education* is measured by the level of education the respondents have attained or are currently pursuing.¹⁶ *Urban residents* and *rural migrants* are used to measure people's urban experience, with *rural residents* as the comparison group. We expect these modernization variables to encourage independent and critical thinking toward the government, reducing people's institutional trust.

Mobilization is measured by four indicators. The first is *media exposure*. Respondents were asked about the frequency of using conventional media channels, including newspaper, television, and radio. The second variable is *political interest*, measured by the respondents' self-evaluation of their concern for government affairs. Another relevant variable is CCP membership (*CCP member*). The last indicator is political generation, and three generations are included: the *postreform generation* (i.e., people who turned 16 after 1978, when the reform started), the *cultural revolution (CR) generation* (i.e., people who turned 16 between 1966 and 1977), and the *socialist generation* (as a comparison group; i.e., people who turned 16 during the socialist era between 1949 and 1965).

Two cultural variables are attitudes toward hierarchy and interpersonal trust. *Attitudes toward hierarchy* are measured by three questions. Respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements: (1) "Even if unreasonable, parents' demands must be heeded by children." (2) "An older person should be asked to adjudicate when there are arguments." (3) "Even if the mother-in-law is wrong, the son should ask the daughter-in-law to concede." Scores were added together to form a single index. *Interpersonal trust* is measured by the following question: "In general, when you interact with people, do you believe that most people are trustworthy or do you think that one should be wary of being cheated?"

We use two measures for institutional performance in China. First, respondents were asked about their overall *evaluations of the direct leadership* (village council officials/work unit supervisor). This is a subjective indicator including both economic and political performance. The other variable is the *city/county economic growth rate* between 2001 and 2003, measuring the economic performance at the city/county level.

As discussed earlier, political fear is a serious concern for survey research in authoritarian societies (Ren, 2009; Shi, 2001; Tang, 2005;). We include *third-party presence* to control for political fear. Third-party presence is a dummy variable that captures the influence of the presence of another adult during the interview besides the interviewer and interviewee.

Findings

Table 2 presents the results from multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) estimations, showing the impacts of modernization, political mobilization, cultural values, and institutional performance on the three types of institutional trust while controlling for political fear.

Table 2. OLS Estimations of Sources of Three Types of Institutional Trust

Variables	Administrative trust	Legal trust	Societal trust
A. Modernization			
Family income	0.00	0.00	0.00
Unemployment	-0.01	-0.02**	-0.01
Male	-0.00	0.00	-0.01***
Legal knowledge	-0.06***	-0.05***	-0.03***
Education	0.00	0.00	0.00
Urban residents	-0.01***	-0.01	-0.01**
Rural migrants	-0.01	0.01	-0.01
Rural residents (comparison group)			
B. Mobilization			
Media exposure	0.02***	0.01	0.01*
Political interest	0.02***	0.03***	0.01
CCP member	0.05***	0.04***	0.04***
Postreform generation	-0.02***	0.00	-0.01
CR generation	-0.01*	0.00	0.00
Socialist generation (comparison group)			
C. Cultural Values			
Attitudes toward hierarchy	0.07***	0.05***	0.12***
Interpersonal trust	0.01*	0.00	0.00
D. Performance			
Evaluation of local leaders' performance	0.12***	0.05***	0.09***
Local GDP growth	0.03***	0.02***	0.02
E. Political Fear			
Third-party presence	0.01**	0.01***	0.01***
Constant	0.53***	0.60***	0.47***
N	5,560	5,560	5,560
Adjusted R ²	0.15	0.05	0.09

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

GDP, gross domestic product.

As a group, modernization variables decrease trust in institutions. However, the impacts of modernization on the three dimensions of institutional trust are all modest. Consistent with our expectations, people with the experience of unemployment and males are less trustful of legal institutions. However, family income does not seem to contribute to the trust level. Among the modernization variables, legal knowledge consistently shows the most significant impact on trust across the three types of institutions. The more legal and political information people have, the less likely they are to trust institutions. People with more urban experience (urban residents as compared with rural migrants and people living and working in rural areas) are more independent and critical of what they hear and learn from the government, and they trust administrative and societal institutions less. However, contrary to what has been observed in democratic societies, education does not show a significant effect on institutional trust.¹⁷

This may result from a large proportion of rural residents having only received primary education, since in primary schools, political education is more concentrated and people are less independent and less critical. OLS regressions separating urban and rural residents show that the education level reduces trust for urban residents and promotes institutional trust for rural residents (results not shown).

On the other hand, political mobilization plays certain roles in institutional trust in China. Overall, mobilization promotes institutional trust, especially the trust in administrative institutions. As predicted, a higher level of media consumption leads to more trust in administrative and legal institutions. People with greater political interest also have higher institutional trust as they are more likely to be exposed to the official rhetoric. This effect, however, is not evident on societal trust since societal institutions mainly deal with civic and social affairs where propaganda is perhaps less pervasive. Communist party membership also consistently and significantly promotes the trust levels in the three types of institutions since political education is much more intensive and regular in the party. The postreform generation has a lower level of trust in administrative institutions than the older generations.

Cultural values also contribute significantly to institutional trust. Controlling for the effects of modernization and mobilization, people who are more favorable to traditional hierarchical ideas are more likely to trust institutions than those with less traditional values. This effect is strong and significant for all three types of institutional trust. Interpersonal trust has a positive but moderate effect on administrative trust, though it fails to show any independent effect on legal and societal trust. It is necessary to further examine the different sources of interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust can be limited to one's family or group ("parochial" or "communal trust"), or it can be generalized to strangers ("civic trust"). While civic trust and communal trust contribute to social capital and promote people's trust in institutions, parochial trust does not (Tang, 2005; Uslander, 1999). An OLS estimation separating the three kinds of interpersonal trust (parochial trust, corporate trust, and civic trust) strongly confirmed this argument (Tang, 2008). Thus, rather than treating interpersonal trust as a unity, we should also distinguish between different types of interpersonal trust—just as there are different dimensions of institutional trust.

Another important source of institutional trust is government performance. Evaluation of institutional performance determines people's institutional trust to a large extent. Performance has a particularly strong effect on trust in administrative and societal institutions. Stepwise addition analyses show that the inclusion of performance variables significantly increases the explanatory power of the model (see Appendix C, Tables 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3). The most interesting observation is the great impact of performance evaluation of local leaders on institutional trust. The higher the evaluation people have of their most immediate-level institutional performance (work unit/village council), the more trust they have toward the institutions. This is probably due to the fact that ordinary people interact with these immediate levels of institutions most directly and much more often than other institutions, such as the people's congress or court. The experience may influence their perceptions of the institutions in general. The economic performance of local institutions, such as recent

economic growth rate, also contributes to people's trust in administrative and legal institutions.

Finally, as expected, third-party presence slightly increases the respondents' reported levels of institutional trust. In other words, there seems to be the effect of political fear. The inclusion of third-party presence in the equations, however, also serves the role of controlling the effect of political fear. It ensures that the effects demonstrated by modernization, mobilization, culture, and government performance continue to be significant when the effect of political fear is controlled for.

Next, we compare the sources of trust in administrative, legal, and societal institutions. Several interesting findings deserve emphasis. Overall, our model explains administrative trust the best (adjusted $R^2 = 0.15$), societal trust second best (adjusted $R^2 = 0.09$), and legal trust the least (adjusted $R^2 = 0.06$). While institutional trust as a whole is important, trust in administrative institutions is perhaps more vital because it is more directly related to the legitimacy of the communist party. Thus, understanding the sources of administrative trust is particularly crucial to the stability of the Chinese state.

Different sources have different impacts on the three dimensions of trust. Not surprisingly, political mobilization variables have the strongest effect on trust in administrative institutions. Stepwise addition analyses show that mobilization increases the explanatory power of the model from 0.02 to 0.06 (see Appendix C, Table 2.1). The mobilization process seems to be successful in boosting Chinese people's confidence in the administrative institutions.

Traditional hierarchical values, deeply rooted in Confucian culture, in turn, have a strong impact on trust in both societal and administrative institutions. Stepwise addition analyses suggest that inclusion of cultural values increases the explanatory power of models from 0.03 to 0.06 for both societal and administrative trust (see Appendix C, Tables 2.1 and 2.3). The effects of cultural values on societal and administrative trust give support to the cultural theories of institutional trust.

Institutional arguments, on the other hand, are strongly supported by the model of trust in administrative institutions. Including the performance variables dramatically increases the explanatory power from 0.09 to 0.15 in the administrative trust model (see Appendix C, Table 2.1), producing a much larger increase as compared with the modernization variables, mobilization variables, and cultural variables. Evaluation of the local leaders' performance, in particular, is the single most important predictor of administrative trust.¹⁸ Thus, to maintain or improve Chinese people's trust in administrative institutions, institutional performance plays the key role. Meanwhile, performance also plays a very important role in shaping legal trust.

In conclusion, institutional trust in China comes from different sources compared with democratic societies. Political mobilization, government performance, and pro-authoritarian values all promote institutional trust in China, while modernization works against institutional trust. Cultural arguments are best illustrated by the societal trust model, while institutional theories are strongly supported by the administrative trust model. As has been observed in democratic societies, government performance plays a major rather than minor role in China in explaining institutional trust, especially administrative trust.

Thus, Chinese people trust institutions not only as a result of the traditional values; their trust is also a product of government-controlled mobilization, and more importantly, a rational choice heavily based on their assessment of institutional performance.

Conclusion

This article studied the patterns and sources of institutional trust in China. We found that institutional trust is high, and it has three different dimensions: administrative trust, legal trust, and societal trust. Results from the 2004 CVES suggest that the high level of institutional trust in China comes from different sources: tradition, political control, and institutional performance. However, though the previous works identify political trust as more traditional than legal-rational based, results in this study tell a different story. Different types of institutional trust come from different sources. As cultural theory argues, tradition proves to be the major contributor to trust in societal institutions. However, the most crucial determinant of trust in administrative institutions is people's evaluations of institutional performance, which also greatly shapes legal trust in China. In other words, institutional trust in China is not only a product of traditional Chinese values but also a result of government propaganda and, most importantly, an individual choice based on institutional performance.

Institutional trust has great implications for China. First, institutional trust in China is indeed different from that in democratic societies. It is based on different sources; while legal-rational trust resembles that of democracies, traditionally based trust and mobilization-based trust resemble that of authoritarian countries. In the case of the three dimensions of institutional trust in China, societal trust is more traditionally and culturally based, while administrative trust is close to institutional trust in democracies.

Second, the change in institutional trust in the future highly depends on institutional performance. While traditional hierarchical values are difficult to change in the short term, the modernization process may contradict and modify them gradually and promote political independence (Inglehart, 1999). Meanwhile, government control of the media is expected to erode with more convenient and flexible modern communication. Thus, passive politicization and traditional values are both likely to play a less significant role in institutional trust in the future. As a result, government performance, which directly influences institutional trust, is likely to play an even larger role in the future. In the short run, the Chinese government can still safely rely on traditional values and propaganda to promote or maintain institutional trust and system support. However, the findings of this study suggest that performance plays a major role in determining people's institutional trust. Hence, the most reliable way to maintain institutional trust lies in the continued improvement of institutional performance—especially government performance at the grassroots level.

To better understand institutional trust in China, future research should study its impact on people's political and legal attitudes and behavior. Will the institutional trust based on the sources identified above play a different role in China as compared with that in democratic societies? Specifically, the next step

of research can examine the following issues: (1) how the three types of trust affect the democratic values and political behavior of the Chinese people, and (2) how institutional trust affects people's legal values and behavior. Answers to these important questions will help us understand the impact of institutional trust on China's prospect of democracy and the development of the rule of law.

Notes

¹An earlier draft of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, Illinois, April 2006.

²Data from the WVS show that between 1980 and 1990, most established democracies have experienced declining trust in the five political institutions: armed forces, legal system, police, parliament, and civil service (Dalton, 1999; Norris, 2000). A study on institutional trust in 10 postcommunist countries finds that trust in the above institutions is roughly half of that in Western Europe (Mishler & Rose, 1997).

³The average institutional trust score is based on the question, "How much confidence do you have in these organizations: a great deal (3), quite a lot (2), not very much (1), or none at all (0)?" The 17 institutions included in the 2000 WVS are churches, armed forces, education system, the press, the labor union, the police, parliament, civil services, the social security system, television, the government, political parties, major companies, the environmental protection movement, the women's movement, the health care system, and the justice system. The five key political institutions include parliament, the civil service, the legal system, the police, and the army. The average institutional trust score for each country divides the total trust score in 17 institutions by the number of relevant questions asked (i.e., relevant institutions) in each country. Democracies refer to those who scored lower than 4 on the Freedom House Index (2000) scale of 1 (free) to 7 (not free).

⁴In Chen's index of "diffuse support," respect for institutions is one important measure, and it is distributed consistently with the whole index (Chen, 2004, Appendix B).

⁵Co-principal investigators include Mingming Shen and Ming Yang (Peking University), Yanqi Tong (University of Utah), Pierre Landry (Yale University), and Wenfang Tang (University of Iowa).

⁶The random sample covered 100 counties (primary sampling units) in China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and provincial-level cities. The survey researchers used population statistics to determine the number of counties from each provincial unit. At least one county or urban district was randomly selected in less-populated units, including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Xizang, Ningxia, and Hainan. Two townships or urban neighborhoods were randomly chosen from each county/district. Two half-degree geographic squares (village or urban residential community) were selected using the global positioning system (GPS) method. Within each half-degree square, two 80 × 80 m squares were selected, again using the GPS method. All valid addresses were recorded, and 10,089 individuals ranging in age from 18 to 66 were included in the final list by using the Kish Table method. The response rate was 7,714/10,089 = 76.5%. The characteristics of the sample are fairly consistent with the 2000 population census (see Appendix A and Appendix B for further details of CVES sampling and summary statistics).

⁷To be consistent with the current literature and to avoid redundancy, this article sometimes uses *institutional trust* interchangeably with *trust in institutions*, though the latter is a much more accurate and formal term.

⁸Some examples of research based on different measurement of political trust are Cole (1973), Hetherington (1998), Mishler and Rose (2001), and Shi (2001).

⁹As our factor analysis shows, loadings of trust on procuratorates are very close on administrative trust (0.545) and legal trust (0.525).

¹⁰From 1981 to 2003, the number of lawyers in China increased from 8,571 to 142,534 (Law Yearbook of China, 1981, 2003).

¹¹Eigenvalues are the variances of the factors. Conventionally, an eigenvalue greater than 1 indicates that a factor can be extracted.

¹²Note that the institutions included in the 2000 WVS and 2004 CVES are different. However, a comparison of the common institutions (party, people's congress, government, police, media, women's organization, and labor union) shows that they are consistent in terms of average trust level and percentage of people who trust the institutions. Details are not shown.

¹³The 2004 CVES asks the respondents, "How much do you trust the following institutions: a great deal, somewhat, not very much, or not at all?" We code "trusting a great deal" as 1, and 0 otherwise. Thus, we get the percentage of people who trust each institution a great deal.

¹⁴For example, Chen's (2004) study on popular support in urban China is based on public opinion surveys conducted in Beijing City.

¹⁵The previous works have different measurements for performance. For instance, Shi (2001, p. 408) measures institutional performance with a single general indicator—government responsiveness. The questions used are (1) "If there was a certain problem which you needed the help of a government official to resolve, do you think you would be given equal and fair treatment by the government?" and (2) "Do you think our government pays attention to people's opinions when making policy?"

¹⁶Since the vast majority of respondents are from the rural area where the education level is low, the survey provides five categories of education level: (1) primary school, (2) junior high school, (3) senior high school, (4) college and university, and (5) master's and doctoral degree.

¹⁷This result, nonetheless, is consistent with previous studies in postcommunist countries and China (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Shi, 2001).

¹⁸An F-test comparing two models excluding cultural variables and institutional performance variables, respectively, from the full model shows that institutional performance plays an equal or greater role than the cultural variables (results not shown).

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Appendix A. Sampling and Data Collection

The research is mainly based on the 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey, supported by the Ford Foundation, Peking University, and the University of Pittsburgh. The project employs a stratified multistage area and spatial sampling combined with probability proportional to size measures and GPS. A distinct advantage with the above sampling method is the inclusion of the large number of the migrant population, which has been neglected from the previous surveys in China. The sample covers 31 provinces, cities, and autonomous regions and contains 7,714 respondents.

Appendix B.

Table 1.1. Summary Statistics for Analysis in the Article (Weighted)

Variable	Observations	Standard		Minimum	Maximum
		Mean	Deviation		
Political institutional trust	7,605	0.63	0.11	0	1
Legal institutional trust	7,605	0.65	0.11	0	1
Societal institutional trust	7,605	0.63	0.13	0	1
Third party	7,697	0.47	0.50	0	1
Family income (log)	7,655	8.93	0.94	3.91	13.76
Unemployed	7,714	0.05	0.20	0	1
Male	7,714	0.51	0.50	0	1
Legal knowledge	7,483	0.43	0.17	0	1
Education (years)	7,714	6.89	3.98	0	23
Urban residents	7,714	0.24	0.41	0	1
Rural migrant	7,714	0.06	0.21	0	1
Rural residents	7,714	0.74	0.43	0	1
Postreform generation	7,714	0.53	0.50	0	1
CR generation	7,714	0.29	0.45	0	1
Socialist generation	7,714	0.17	0.38	0	1
CCP membership	7,714	0.07	0.25	0	1
Media exposure	7,675	0.50	0.24	0	1
Political interest	7,659	0.61	0.27	0	1
Attitudes toward hierarchy	7,115	0.58	0.19	0	1
Interpersonal trust	7,105	0.49	0.50	0	1
Evaluation of local leaders	7,363	0.62	0.25	0	1
Local GDP growth	6,947	0.05	0.15	0	1
Provincial income (log)	7,714	7.83	0.53	6.98	9.34
Tolerance	7,596	0.29	0.13	0	1
Efficacy	7,631	0.50	0.17	0	1
Voicing	7,575	0.05	0.36	0	1
Organizational activism	7,714	0.72	0.11	0	1
Mediation	7,714	0.71	0.36	0	1
Government	7,714	0.71	0.36	0	1
Court	7,714	0.71	0.36	0	1
Legislature	7,714	0.05	0.17	0	1
Media	7,714	0.07	0.21	0	1
Direct negotiation	7,714	0.29	0.37	0	1
Unconventional participation	7,714	0.01	0.06	0	1

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

Note: GDP, gross domestic product.

Appendix C. Stepwise Deletion OLS Analysis of Sources of Institutional Trust

Table 2.1. Sources of Trust in Political Institutions

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
A. Political Fear				
Third-party presence	0.00	0.01*	0.01**	0.01**
B. Modernization				
Family income	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Unemployed	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Male	0.00	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.00
Legal knowledge	-0.09***	-0.08***	-0.07***	-0.06***
Education	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Urban residents	-0.01***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.01***
Rural migrants	-0.02**	-0.01*	-0.01	-0.01
Rural residents (comparison group)				
C. Mobilization				
Media exposure		0.02***	0.02***	0.02***
Political interest		0.01	0.02**	0.02***
CCP member		0.07***	0.07***	0.05***
Postreform generation		-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***
CR generation		-0.01***	-0.01**	-0.01*
Socialist generation (comparison group)				
D. Cultural Values				
Attitudes toward hierarchy			0.09***	0.07***
Interpersonal trust			0.02***	0.01*
E. Performance				
Evaluation of local leaders' performance				0.12***
Local GDP growth				0.03***
Constant	0.69***	0.66***	0.58***	0.53***
<i>n</i>	7,379	7,316	6,417	5,560
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.02	0.06	0.09	0.15

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

Notes: ****p* < 0.01. ***p* < 0.05. **p* < 0.10.

GDP, gross domestic product.

Table 2.2. Sources of Trust in Legal Institutions

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
A. Political Fear				
Third-party presence	0.00*	0.01**	0.01**	0.01***
B. Modernization				
Family income	0.00	0.00*	0.00	0.00
Unemployed	-0.02**	-0.02**	-0.02**	-0.02**
Male	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Legal knowledge	-0.05***	-0.06***	-0.05***	-0.05***
Education	0.00*	0.00	0.00	0.00
Urban residents	0.00	-0.01*	-0.01	-0.01
Rural migrants	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
Rural residents (comparison group)				
C. Mobilization				
Media exposure		0.01*	0.01*	0.01
Political interest		0.03***	0.03***	0.03***
CCP member		0.05***	0.05***	0.04***
Postreform generation		0.00	0.00	0.00
CR generation		0.00	0.00	0.00
Socialist generation (comparison group)				
D. Cultural Values				
Attitudes toward hierarchy			0.05***	0.05***
Interpersonal trust			0.00	0.00
E. Performance				
Evaluation of local leaders' performance				0.05***
Local GDP growth				0.02***
Constant	0.69***	0.66***	0.63***	0.60***
<i>n</i>	7,379	7,316	6,417	5,560
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.01	0.03	0.04	0.05

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.10$.

GDP, gross domestic product.

Table 2.3. Sources of Trust in Societal Institutions

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
A. Political Fear				
Third-party presence	0.01***	0.01***	0.01**	0.01***
B. Modernization				
Family income	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Unemployed	-0.02**	-0.01*	-0.01	-0.01
Male	-0.01**	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.01***
Legal knowledge	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.04***	-0.03***
Education	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00*
Urban residents	0.00	-0.01**	-0.01*	-0.01**
Rural migrants	-0.00**	-0.00	-0.01*	-0.01
Rural residents (comparison group)				
C. Mobilization				
Media exposure		0.01**	0.01**	0.01*
Political interest		0.01	0.01	0.01
CCP member		0.06***	0.06***	0.04***
Postreform generation		-0.01**	-0.01	-0.01
CR generation		0.00	0.00	0.00
Socialist generation (comparison group)				
D. Cultural Values				
Attitudes toward hierarchy			0.12***	0.12***
Interpersonal trust			0.02***	0.00
E. Performance				
Evaluation of local leaders' performance				0.09***
Local GDP growth				0.02
Constant	0.69***	0.64***	0.53***	0.47***
<i>n</i>	7,379	7,316	6,417	5,560
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.01	0.03	0.06	0.09

Source: 2004 China Values and Ethics Survey.

Notes: ****p* < 0.01. ***p* < 0.05. **p* < 0.10.

GDP, gross domestic product.