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How trust and dialogue shape political participation in mainland China

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how the perceived propinquity of government (defined by responsiveness and transparency) influences citizens' perception about government and affects the relationship between political trust and contact-type political participation in mainland China. Specifically, we believe that trust in government's ability, benevolence and integrity matter more to contact-type political participation under a high level of perceived dialogic propinquity than under a low level. We use PROCESS to analyze third wave data from the Asian Barometer Survey to understand these moderation effects. Based upon the data from 3,472 mainland Chinese citizens, the results show that the more citizens trust their government's ability, the higher their willingness to conduct contact-type participation under conditions of high perceived dialogic propinquity. Under conditions of low perceived dialogic propinquity, however, trust in government's ability has no predictive effect on citizens' willingness to participate in contact-type political activities. Moreover, compared with the dimension of trust in government's ability, perceived dialogic propinquity fails to moderate the relationships between trust in government's benevolence and integrity, and contact-type political participation.

Introduction

Previous studies have found that political participation can be predicted by various factors including issue salience, mobilization efforts, socio-economic status, civic skills, political interest, motivation, political opportunity, political trust and political competence (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). No predictor has received more debate than political trust.

Since the late 1960s, with the systematic decline of political trust in Western societies, political trust has been extensively discussed (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Scholars have claimed different relationships between political trust and political participation, although the operation of different studies varies. Nevertheless, it is normally believed that distrust might encourage protest-type political participation, as citizens who do not believe that the government is willing and able to serve their interests are more likely to challenge it (Aberbach & Busch, 1975; Gamson, 1968; Kaase, 1999; Muller, 1977; Paige, 1971; Seligson, 1980). Meanwhile, some scholars have suggested that people who hold more political trust are more likely to participate in politics (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005; Hetherington, 1998, 2005; Rudolph & Evans, 2005; Southwell, 1985). Still others have even claimed that political trust has no effect on political participation (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde, 1995; Bratton, 1999; Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1980). Furthermore, different dimensions of political trust are also proved to have different impact on political

participation, for instance, competence-based trust is found to be a stronger predictor of petition in mainland China than commitment-based trust (Li, 2008).

The different viewpoints shed light on the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between political trust and political participation, particularly since the literature leaves relatively unexplored the explanatory power of context. In previous studies, some scholars have sought to answer these kinds of questions. For instance, a notable assumption states that only the joint presence of political trust and efficacy will bring about political action (Fraser, 1970; Gamson, 1968). Empirical studies analyzing this claim have yielded mixed results in America and even in a large cross-national study. Hooghe and Marien (2013) claimed that political trust is positively associated with institutionalized participation but negatively associated with non-institutionalized participation. Moreover, they found that the influence of political trust on institutionalized participation builds upon internal efficacy.

In the context of mainland China, however, there is no general theory regarding the conditions under which trust in government facilitates or fails to activate political participation. Thus, in addition to examining a direct relationship between political trust and political participation, this study also proposes that such trust may not always result in political participation because some situational factors may negate such action among citizens. For both theoretical and practical reasons, it is important to identify the factors that can influence the relationship between citizens' trust in government and their political participation. In short, a major purpose of this study is to evaluate when trust matters, so as to delineate the conditions under which citizens' trust in government is more or less likely to be related to their political behaviors. We examine this trade-off by positing that trust in government will have different effects on contact-type participation, depending on the level of citizens' perceived dialogic propinquity of government – the combination of government responsiveness and transparency. Specifically, *trust in government* is defined as a three-dimension concept including ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995); and *contact-type participation* as a special but ubiquitous mode of political engagement in the context of mainland China (Zhang & Lin, 2014).

Propinquity is a fundamental principle of dialogic communication. It affects the level of connection between citizens and their government, and thus whether citizens are willing to participate in political issues. This is especially important in the unique political context of mainland China. Thus, we propose that dialogic propinquity would be a moderator on the political trust - contact-type participation relationship. Furthermore, the dynamics between citizens and government differ from those in established democratic societies. For citizens, the legal or established channel of political connection is constrained because of the bureaucratic structure of the Chinese government. Also, citizens' inherent authoritarian value impedes their willingness to engage with government through political participation. To solve the problem of disconnection, we propose that the Chinese government ought to undertake initiatives and strategically adopt dialogic communication improve the relationship between citizens and government. From the perspective of strategic management, considering the bureaucratic structure of the Chinese government, it is feasible for Chinese government to take dialogic propinquity at the first step. This is because dialogic propinquity as the basic principle of dialogic communication can connect and engage citizens with government.

These arguments will be elucidated and analyzed in greater detail in the following sections, drawing on a sample of 3,472 citizens in mainland China. Our findings show empirically that, apart from the positive direct relationship between trust in government and contact-type participation, more subtle interaction effects can be distinguished. The relationship between trust in government and contact-type participation is moderated by the perceived level of dialogic propinquity of government, with a high level of dialogic propinquity strengthening, and a low level diminishing, the relationship between trust and performance.

Literature review

Trust in government

When discussing the citizens' trust in government, scholars have distinguished the subjects in which citizens trust – the system of government, institutions or organizations of government, political

regimes, and actual personnel within government (Cook & Gronke, 2005; Goldfinch, Gauld, & Herbison, 2009; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). In strategic political communication, Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) stressed the importance of understanding government's role in strategic political communication and the organization-public relationship (OPR) in political context (Huang & Zhang, 2015). In this study, we focus on examining the role trust plays in the relationship between mainland China government and the public.

Note that trust in government may not be adequately measured by a single index but rather be presented in a range of dimensions such as integrity and competence, fairness and responsiveness, and outcome and process (Citrin & Muste, 1999). Similarly, from the standpoint of organization, Mayer et al. (1995) identified three major factors of trustworthiness: Ability, the "group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain" (p. 717); benevolence, "the extent to which the organization is believed to do good and show well-meaning attitude to its publics" (p. 718); and integrity, "the trustor believes the trustee will insist on acceptable principles" (p. 719).

Citizens' perception of government's ability has always been a major indicator of political trust in mainland China. From a rational-choice perspective, some scholars (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Coleman, 1994; Pharr, 2000) have argued that trust in government mainly derives from the government's ability to perform its functions and deliver services. Rothstein (2009) associated the impartiality of political behaviors and policies with the degree to which the public supports government.

Moreover, ability-based political trust matters a great deal in mainland China. In part, this is because the political legitimacy of the Chinese government largely rests on its strong ability to develop the economy, provide public goods and improve its citizens' lives (Shue, 2004; Zhao, 2009; Zhong, 1996; Zhu, 2011). Also, citizens' authoritarian value stresses ability as a source of political trust. Authoritarian value describes the perception that government is an omnipotent institution in which the "Chinese people continue to crave leaders who can solve all their problems" (Pye & Pye, 2009, p. 66). Empirical studies have demonstrated that trust in government's ability has a strong effect on political behaviors in the Chinese context (Lapidot, Kark, & Shamir, 2007; Li, 2008).

On the other hand, many scholars in political science and psychology have widely studied and explained the importance of public perception on government's benevolence (Cook & Wall, 1980; Frost, Stimpson, & Maughan, 1978; Jones, James, & Bruni, 1975; Poon, 2013; Whitener, Brodt, & Korsgaard, 1998). Comparing with ability, benevolence is psychologically different: it is affective, focuses more on organizational intentions to act in a benevolent manner, and satisfying public interests (Das & Teng, 2001; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). Thus, some scholars have suggested that cognitive indicators of organizational trust, like ability, are the basic requirements for leaders to display, while the affective indicators are features that go beyond what the public requires leaders to do (Lapidot et al., 2007). In other words, in some circumstances, benevolence may be a better indicator of organizational trust than ability.

In the existing literature, benevolence is also conceptualized as a combination of interactional courtesy and responsibility to inform at an organizational level (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003). Interactional courtesy is defined as a respectful attitude in performing governmental duties, and responsibility as the level of communication provided to the audience (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003). Actively informing and communicating with citizens is a characteristic of governmental engagement and a means to shape political trust (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006).

Additionally, trust in government's benevolence is an indicator of regime legitimacy, especially in mainland China. Tong (2011) suggested that being benevolent, taking people's interests as "the starting and ending points of governance" (pp. 153) was an important requirement of leaders in the traditional Confucian scheme. In this scheme, moral consideration weighed much more than legal code, therefore, in an ideal government, benevolence may strongly influence the public perception of regime legitimacy. For instance, police brutality cases easily trigger protests.

Although Li's research (2008) found that trust in government's benevolence had no influence on political participation in rural China, our study takes the topic a step further: we use data from a larger population covering all Chinese citizens, not just rural publics; and we investigate a different

type of political participation from Li's research. Hence, our research takes trust in government's benevolence to infer the effects of political trust on political participation as well.

Furthermore, government integrity is believed to be an indicator not only of trust, but also of distrust, a rising problem recently mainland China. The connection between integrity and trust is clearly defined by Anthony Giddens in an interpersonal communication context: "To trust the other is also to gamble upon the capability of the individual actually to be able to act with integrity" (Giddens, 1994, p. 138). McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar (2002) have conducted a literature review of 32 trust articles and books, and found that 27 of them regarded integrity or similar concepts as an indicator of trust. This relationship is the same for citizens and government: compared to business organizations, people impose on government stronger requirements for objectivity, honesty, fairness and morality (Denhardt, 2002; Funnell, Jupe, & Andrew, 2009).

In recent mainland China, society's distrust of government is becoming a problem that cannot be ignored (Li, 2011). Among all integrity issues that harm trust, the increasingly rampant corruption is critical (Gong, 2015; Quade, 2007). Empirical data has supported the viewpoint that political corruption has a trust-eroding effect in East Asian regimes (Chang & Chu, 2006). Since negative information (i.e. corruption, malpractice) is more influential on integrity-based trust than positive information, the Chinese central government has for decades enacted many policies and rules to regulate officials' behavior and combat corruption (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004; Martijn, Spears, Van der Plight, & Jakobs, 1992; Quade, 2007). Especially in recent years, after the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) acknowledged that integrity and anti-corruption posed lethal issues for the whole country, Chinese citizens have tended to evaluate integrity more importantly as a function of trust. Therefore, this study considers trust in government's integrity as the third dimension of political trust.

Contact-type political participation

Political participation refers to those "legal activities by individual citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel" (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1971, p. 9). Publics can use political participation to communicate their desires, interests, and demands with the government and politicians (Verba et al., 1971). There are different modes of political participation. For example, some modes of political participation are electoral-related, such as voting and joining campaign activities, while other modes are non-electoral, —such as contacting with governmental officials (Verba et al., 1971).

Based on the context of mainland China, Zhang and Lin (2014) proposed three modes of political participation — "the canonical mode", "the contacting/lobbying mode", and "ruling party-initiated mode" (p. 24). The canonical mode of political participation helps publics achieve a common good rather than private interests; the contacting/lobbying mode "benefits private interests and is engaged in individually"; the ruling party-initiated mode contains official campaign activities, political learning sessions, and elections (Zhang & Lin, 2014, p.24).

Some scholars suggest there are differences in the nature of political participation – institutionalized and non-institutionalized participation. Institutionalized participation refers to acts directly related to institutional process (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995), such as working in a political party and contacting government officials; non-institutionalized participation is used to challenge the decisions by elites and often occurs outside the political system (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002), such as signing petitions and taking part in demonstrations.

In this article, we focus on contact-type political participation, in which citizens contact political officials or governmental institutions to solve personal problems based on private interests. Obviously, compared with institutionalized or non-institutionalized participation in the Western context, the meaning of contact-type political participation in mainland China is unique because the context differs from that of well-established democratic societies (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009; Sayed, 2011). First, in mainland China, citizens have limited official channels to participate in politics

(Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012; Freedom House, 2011; Zhang & Lin, 2014). State power disallows regime-threatening actions and enables the Party-state to maintain the social order despite myriad social conflicts (Cai, 2008). Further, citizen-government dynamics are unlike those in established democracies. For instance, Shi (1997, p. 21) defined political participation in China as behaviors “by private citizens aimed at influencing the actual results of governmental policy.” When legal or established channels of political expression are circumscribed, citizens have to find other means to effectively engage officials or governmental institutions; this often requires tactics or political resources to obtain support from the media or from sympathetic state agents, or to gain access to important institutions (Cai, 2004). In this environment, citizens’ personal social networks and resources might work to get access to political officials or governmental institutions in order to solve personal problems.

Linking trust in government and contact-type political participation

In fact, the relationship between trust in government and political participation is unclear. It is commonly agreed that the lower the political trust, the higher the chance of non-institutionalized political actions (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Kaase, 1999). Heath (2008) analyzed the monthly general population surveys (2000–2002) in the UK and revealed that people who are dissatisfied with the workings of democracy are more likely to protest than people who are very satisfied. Additionally, distrust in government is believed to increase public involvement in riots (Paige, 1971). Gamson (1968) explained that people are more likely to challenge the government when it is unable or unwilling to serve public interests (p. 48).

In addition, there is a lack of consensus on the effect of political trust on institutionalized participation. Some scholars suggest that trust in government and voting intention are positively related (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005; Pattie & Johnston, 2001). Others see no causal link (Bratton, 1999; Miller, 1980). On the one hand, political trust was found having no significant relationship with institutionalized participation (Seligson, 1980). On the other hand, Bratton (1999) argued that although dimensions like voting and communing or even the overall level of participation did not show a significant relationship, a positive relationship between trust in government and contacting political leaders still existed.

As previously discussed, political participation in China is unique because the context differs from that of democratic societies. We posit that the relationships between political trust (in governmental ability, benevolence and integrity) and contact-type political participation is positive on some grounds. First, empirical studies in mainland China bolster Bratton’s view, i.e., trust in government’s ability may have a positive impact on political participation. Li (2008) found that for rural Chinese, trust in the central government rested on its perceived competence and commitment – and competence proved highly significant in predicting willingness to lead, join and support petitioning. Namely, with the higher level of trust in government, people would be more likely to join or support political participation such as petition.

Second, Chinese traditionally have seen governors as part of a benevolent hierarchy – in effect, considering them as “governor parents” (Pye & Pye, 2009). The traditional Chinese worldview considers both the universe and human societies as structured into five categories or stations in descending order; authority, heaven, earth, emperor, parents, and teachers. Each category may serve as a “father figure” of its lower orders or roles. This structure compounds the flow of force and authority in a single direction and fosters one-sided power relationships among people, as well as between people and their social and natural environments (Shih, 1988). For millennia, Chinese emperors ruled as the “son of Heaven” over subjects who were viewed as “son-citizens” (*zimin*) (Shih, 1988), a patriarchal political culture that persists to some degree throughout modern Chinese society (Shih, 1988). For their part, the “son-citizens” tend to believe that governors will exercise benevolence in resolving their personal issues, just as parents or family leaders would do. Accordingly, if people have a higher level of trust in government’s benevolence, they will be more likely to contact political leaders to resolve the problems for them.

Third, Theobald (1989) has suggested that a government with weak integrity, especially corruption, might not have the potential to encourage citizens to participate in political issues. Since such a phenomenon will cause a sense of political alienation in ordinary citizens, we expect,

Hypothesis 1a. Trust in government's ability positively predicts contact-type political participation.

Hypothesis 1b. Trust in government's benevolence positively predicts contact-type political participation.

Hypothesis 1c. Trust in government's integrity positively predicts contact-type political participation.

The moderating role of dialogic propinquity

Dialogic communication has always been considered as a strategy in relationship management, especially between organizations and the public (Gurnig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham, 2003). Many scholars have suggested that healthy relationships can help to motivate citizens' intentions to participate in political issues (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011); therefore, the government should adopt dialogic principles as a strategy for public engagement.

Propinquity is a principle of dialogic public relations theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002), defined as an orientation in which "publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations" (p. 26). Furthermore, dialogic propinquity is considered as the most basic step of dialogic communication (Kent & Theunissen, 2016). Berko, Rosenfeld, & Samovar (1997, p. 254) hold that it is essential to build "a connection, association, or involvement" through which dialogue occurs. Kent and Taylor (2002) illustrated the meaning of dialogic propinquity in much greater detail. For example, they identified immediacy of presence and engagement as two essential features of dialogic communication that create propinquity. Immediacy of presence requires parties to communicate about issues in the present and in a common space; engagement signifies that participants must be both accessible and prepared to give their whole selves to encounters (p. 26).

Based on the definition of dialogic propinquity, we assume that responsiveness and transparency are two essential methods for government to show its dialogic propinquity. Previous research proposed responsiveness as a basic requirement for dialogic communication (Avidar, 2013). **Responsiveness** has multiple facets:

- "an organization's willingness to respond promptly to customer inquiries and complaints" (Kelleher & Miller, 2006);
- the interaction between sender and receiver (Stromer-Galley, 2000, p.117);
- the probability that each partner will respond to the others (Davis, 1982).

Thus, responsiveness of government makes immediacy of presence possible and shows government's willingness to genuinely entertain the needs of citizens.

Transparency of governmental institutions refers to sufficient, free information flow from governmental institutions to citizens. Underscoring the importance of this flow, Callison and Seltzer (2010) proposed that dialogic communication strategies should factor in the utility, accessibility and responsiveness of information. More importantly, transparency and responsiveness are tightly woven. For instance, according to Chen, Pan, and Xu (2015), merely providing information is a meaningful indicator of responsiveness. Thus, government transparency might facilitate an open, shared space for publics.

On the other hand, citizens' perceived dialogic propinquity of government also involves their sense of external political efficacy, defined by Niemi, Craig, and Mattei (1991) as "beliefs about the

responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizen demands” (p. 1408). External political efficacy represents “a more general evaluation of how receptive political institutions are to input from all individuals in society, not simply from the individual himself” (Southwell, 2012, p. 72). Thus, citizens’ perceived dialogic propinquity of government also indicates the degree of external political efficacy.

Citizens’ sense of external political efficacy is tightly wound with their attitude towards political participation. Southwell (2012) even suggested that the notion of meaninglessness, as a dimension of political alienation, might be expressed by “external efficacy.” Seeman (1959) clearly defined meaninglessness as “a situation in which the respondent finds politics or political events incomprehensible, or too complicated to identify and act upon means of influencing political events” (Cale, 2014, p. 16). If citizens feel low external efficacy in political life, they may think political participation meaningless, and then suffer a strong sense of political alienation. Such political alienation can discourage the propensity to participate in political action (Gamson, 1968; Mc Dill & Ridley, 1962). In contrast with established democratic societies, mainland China citizens who perceive low external efficacy might more easily deem political engagement to be meaningless. Pye and Pye (2009, p. 66) felt that the authoritarian value described earlier convinces Chinese citizens that political participation is meaningless, either because it is unnecessary or pointless in the face of an all-powerful government.

An important implication of this reasoning is that low responsiveness and poor transparency of government might cause citizens to perceive a low level of external efficacy, engendering political alienation and rejection of political engagement. In such a situation, political alienation, not trust in government or other factors, would be critical to determining political participation. In contrast, trust in government is more likely to elicit political participation when citizens perceive a high level of external efficacy fostered by high government responsiveness and transparency. Therefore, we expect,

Hypothesis 2a. The positive relationship between trust in government’s ability and contact-type political participation is moderated by citizens’ perceived dialogic propinquity of government: under a high level of perceived dialogic propinquity, the relationship is stronger; under a low level of perceived dialogic propinquity, there is no relationship.

Hypothesis 2b. The positive relationship between trust in government’s benevolence and contact-type political participation is moderated by citizens’ perceived dialogic propinquity of government: under a high level of perceived dialogic propinquity, the relationship is stronger; under a low level of perceived dialogic propinquity, there is no relationship.

Hypothesis 2c. The positive relationship between trust in government’s integrity and contact-type political participation is moderated by citizens’ perceived dialogic propinquity of government: Under a high level of perceived dialogic propinquity, the relationship is stronger; under a low level of perceived dialogic propinquity, there is no relationship.

Method

Our study analyzed data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), a systematic comparative survey conducted through face-to face interviews on public opinion of “political values, democracy, governance, human security, and economic reforms” in Asia (“Program Objectives”, 2012). Among the four waves of ABS data, our study utilized the third wave from mainland China, which was released from 2010 to 2012, for a total 3,472 respondents.

The respondent pool was 52.5% male and 47.5% female; ages ranged from 18 to 93 with 45 as the median; the education level was measured on a 9-point scale ranging from no formal education to master’s degree and above with the median at “junior high school”; income per year ranged from 72 to 435,685 US dollars with a median at 3,436 US dollars.

Although the third wave of the ABS data covered 13 Asian political systems, we had concentrated on political trust in mainland China for several reasons: 1) the range of findings whether China on the institutional level is a trust or distrust society (Beck, 1992; Fukuyama, 1995; Li, 2008; Wang, Dalton, & Shin, 2006, p. 2) the impact of economic and political transformations in mainland China, which increase the need for mutual respect and understanding, and dialogic communication by the government; 3) the different context for political participation in mainland China compared to Western democracies (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009; Sayed, 2011). In our view, Mainland China offered a rich and unexplored context for testing a model that attempted to explain the impact of each dimension of political trust on contact political participation under various dialogic conditions. The following section provided information about operationalization of our variables.

Operationalization of the proposed variables

Dependent variable

Contact-type political participation. We used the following question in the ABS to measure contact-type political participation: “Sometimes people might seek help to solve personal or family problems, or people have different opinions on governmental policies. What types of activities have you done to express your concerns, or solve the problems?” This question contained four sub-items such as “Express opinions to higher officials”, “Express opinions to representatives of the People’s Congress”, “Write to relevant governmental institutions”, and particularly “Write to newspapers”. News media can be considered as a political institution with the institutional perspective in political communication and political science (e.g., Cook, 2006; Schudson, 2012; Sparrow, 1999). The Chinese government owns at least 51% of each major newspaper, and thus controls all of them (Hu, 2003). Moreover, newspapers in mainland China are subject to the Propaganda Department, thus they function as government institutions to stabilize authoritarian regimes (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). The ABS measured each item on a 4-point scale from “very often” to “not at all”. This subscale provided sufficient – albeit modest – reliability for our sample, $\alpha = .52$.

Independent variables

Trust in government’s ability: This variable was measured by the following ABS question: “to what extent do you believe the central/local government has the ability to solve the following problems?” The scale included “promote economic growth”, “narrow the gap between rich and poor” and “combat corruption”. For each item, a 4-point scale ranged from “a great deal of ability” to “not at all”. The answers to these questions were averaged in our study to become a variable named trust in government’s ability, with satisfactory reliability .84.

Our study used two survey questions to measure trust in government’s benevolence: “central/local government is sincerely willing to benefit public” and “central/local government only considers the benefits of privileged”. Each question was measured by a 4-point scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” the second question was reverse coded. The variable “trust in government’s benevolence” was developed in our study from the averaged answers, with reliability .62.

Trust in government’s integrity was measured by one survey question: “How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in your local/municipal government”. This question was reverse-coded and measured by a 4-point scale, ranging from “Hardly anyone is involved.” to “Almost everyone is corrupt”. The answer was averaged to develop a variable named “trust in government’s integrity”.

Moderator

Our study used three ABS questions to measure respondents’ perception of governmental propinquity. One question related to institutional transparency, “How often do government officials withhold important information from the public view?” (A 4-point response scale included the following: “always,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” and “rarely”). Two questions related to

institutional responsiveness, “How likely will the government solve the most important problem you identified within the next five years?” (A 4-point scale included answers that ranged from “very likely” to “not at all likely”); and “How well do you think the government responds to what people want?” (A 4-point scale ranged from “very responsive” to “not responsive at all”). In dealing with this variable, our study combined these three questions into one variable. Reliability for this sample was just acceptable, where $\alpha = .52$.

Control variables

Our analysis used demographic factors, such as age, gender, education level, political status, income, as control variables (Li, 2008). Moreover, social capital had usually been considered as a predictor of political behavior such as voting or protesting (Hooghe, 2003). In this current study, two dimensions of social capital, generalized trust and networks, were regarded as control variables (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Newton, 2007). One ABS question tested *generalized trust*, which was “Generally speaking, most people are trustworthy” (a 4-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), while another question tested networks, “How many people do you contact in a typical week?” (a 5-point scale included “less than 4”, “5 to 9”, “10 to 19”, “20 to 49”, “on or over 50”). Additionally, based on the understanding that media exposure had an effect on political participation by Chinese citizens, we controlled the variable “political news received” by using the question asked in the ABS study, i.e., “Do you read or listen to political news?” (A 6-point scale from “never” to “several times per day”) (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). To make the analytical results more interpretable and more meaningful, the main terms of this study (the independent variables and the moderator) were mean-centered (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2013, pp.264–266).

Table 1 listed the descriptive statistics of all variables.

Results

The analytical framework of our study utilized a simple moderation model, Model 1 in PROCESS, which included one moderator influencing the effect size of an independent variable on a dependent variable. (PROCESS was a computational tool for analyzing conditional effects in moderation or mediation models (Hayes, 2013; Hayes & Matthes, 2009). All coefficients in our study were unstandardized.

Trust in government’s ability, contact-type political participation and propinquity

We adopted PROCESS both for analyzing direct and moderated effects of trust in government’s ability on contact-type political participation, as reported in Table 2. The whole model was proved to

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables.

	Scale min.	Scale max	Mean	SD	Pearson Correlation				
					1	2	3	4	5
Age									
Gender									
Education									
Income									
Political Status									
Generalized Trust	1	4	2.93	.52					
Networks	1	5	3.13	1.30					
Political News Received	1	6	4.05	1.54					
1.Trust in government’s ability	1	4	3.03	.56		.38**	.39**	.24**	.05*
2.Propinquity	1	4	2.86	.60			.38**	.39**	.01
3.Trust in government’s benevolence	1	4	2.85	.44				.26**	.02
4.Trust in government’s integrity	1	4	2.78	.70					.02
5.Contact-type political participation	1	4	1.22	.35					

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

be significant; for control variables, we found that gender ($B = -.10, SE = .01, p < .01$), political status ($B = .05, SE = .01, p < .01$) and political news received ($B = .02, SE = .00, p < .01$) were significantly related to contact-type political participation. And the independent variable – trust in government's ability – had positive and significant influence on contact-type political participation ($B = .04, SE = .01, p < .01$). The variance explained by all variables was 6%. Therefore, **H1a was supported**.

Following Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the interactions by deriving separate equations for high and low (one standard deviation above and below the mean) conditions of the predictors, and tested the simple slopes for each of the interactions.

The results in Table 2 also showed that the interaction term was significant ($B = .05, SE = .02, F(1, 2779) = 4.43, p < 0.05$). Figure 1 showed the plots of the significant interactions between trust in government's ability and propinquity that occurred when we were predicting contact-type political participation. For individuals who perceived propinquity to be high, trust in government's ability was positively related to contact-type political participation ($B = .06, SE = .02, p < .001$), which was stronger than the effect among individuals with average perceived propinquity ($B = .04, SE = .01, p < .01$); and for individuals who perceived propinquity to be low, there was no relationship between trust in government's ability and contact-type political participation ($B = .01, SE = .02, p = .63$). Therefore, **H2a was supported**.

Trust in government's benevolence, contact-type political participation and propinquity

We also hypothesized that trust in government's benevolence among high perceived propinquity individuals would be more strongly related to contact-type political participation, while people with low perceived propinquity would not show such a relationship. In Table 3, the whole model was also significant. For control variables, gender ($B = -.10, SE = .01, p < .01$), political status ($B = .05, SE = .01, p < .01$) and political news received ($B = .02, SE = .00, p < .01$) could be seen as significant predictors of contact-type political participation. However, the independent variable, trust in government's benevolence, was not significantly related to contact-type political participation ($B = .01, SE = .02, p = .44$). Hence, **H1b was not supported**.

The results in Table 3 also showed that there were no significant relationships between trust in government's benevolence and contact-type political participation among both high and low

Table 2. Moderation analysis for the effects of trust in government's ability on contact-type political participation.

	B	SE B
<i>Main effects</i>		
Age	.00	.01
Gender	-.10**	.01
Education	.01	.00
Income	.00	.00
Generalized Trust	.01	.02
Networks	.01	.01
Political Status	.05**	.01
Political News Received	.02**	.00
Trust in government's ability	.04**	.01
Propinquity	.00	.01
<i>Interaction effects</i>		
Ability * Propinquity	.05*	.02
R^2	.06	
ΔR^2	.002	
df	(1,2779)	
F	4.43	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. B = unstandardized effect size.

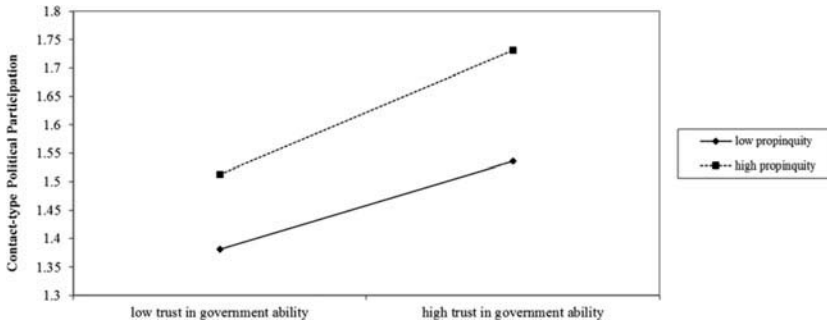


Figure 1. Interaction effect between trust in government's ability and propinquity on contact-type political participation.

Table 3. Moderation analysis for the effects of trust in government's benevolence on contact-type political participation.

	B	SE B
<i>Main effects</i>		
Age	.00	.01
Gender	-.10**	.01
Education	.01	.00
Income	.00	.00
Generalized Trust	.02	.01
Networks	.01	.01
Political Status	.05**	.01
Political News Received	.02**	.00
Trust in government's benevolence	.01	.02
Propinquity	.00	.01
<i>Interaction effects</i>		
Benevolence * Propinquity	.02	.03
R^2	.06	
ΔR^2	.00	
<i>df</i>	(1, 2718)	
<i>F</i>	.80	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. *B* = unstandardized effect size.

perceived propinquity individuals ($B = .02$, $SE = .03$, $F(1, 2718) = .80$, $p = 0.37$). Therefore, propinquity could not moderate the relationship between trust in government's benevolence and contact-type political participation. **H2b was not supported.**

Trust in government's integrity, contact-type political participation and propinquity

The results in Table 4 showed how trust in government's integrity and perceived propinquity predict contact-type political participation. The whole model was significant, among all control variables, we found that gender ($B = -.09$, $SE = .01$, $p < .01$), political status ($B = .06$, $SE = .01$, $p < .01$) and political news received ($B = .02$, $SE = .00$, $p < .01$) were significant predictors of contact-type political participation. The independent variable, trust in government's integrity, was not associated with contact-type political participation ($B = -.03$, $SE = .04$, $p = .37$). The variance explained by all variables was 6%. Therefore, **H1c was supported.**

Regarding the moderation effect, the variable interacted by trust in government's integrity and perceived propinquity was not significant ($B = .01$, $SE = .01$, $F(1, 2958) = .78$, $p = .38$). Thus, perceived propinquity didn't have moderation effect on the relationship between trust in government's integrity and contact-type political participation. **H2c was not supported.**

Table 4. Moderation analysis for the effects of trust in government's integrity on contact-type political participation.

	B	SE B
<i>Main effects</i>		
Age	.00	.01
Gender	-.09**	.01
Education	.01	.00
Income	.00	.00
Generalized Trust	.01	.01
Networks	.01	.01
Political Status	.06**	.01
Political News Received	.02**	.00
Trust in government's integrity	-.03	.04
Propinquity	-.02	.04
<i>Interaction effects</i>		
Integrity * Propinquity	.01	.01
R^2	.06	
ΔR^2	.00	
<i>df</i>	(1, 2958)	
<i>F</i>	.78	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. *B* = unstandardized effect size.

Discussion and conclusion

By now, there appears to be general agreement with the idea that trust in government has a positive impact on contact-type participation. However, general agreement doesn't equate to a general theory. So far, research has not produced a general theory as to when trust in government encourages or discourages political participation. Our study empirically shows there are subtle interaction effects – not merely a direct positive relationship – between trust in government and contact-type participation. We found that the perceived high level of dialogic propinquity strengthens the relationship between trust in government's ability and contact-type participation, and the perceived low level of dialogic propinquity diminishes it.

Direct effects of trust in government on political participation

Our research makes several contributions. First, we re-verify the existing positive relationship between political trust and political participation among Chinese citizens. The findings resonate with the previous studies confirming that political trust can predict citizens' willingness to participate in political issues (Li, 2008; Zhong, 2014). Particularly, by revealing the distinction among trust in government's ability, benevolence and integrity, this research supports the finding of Li's (2008) research that trust in government's ability weighs more than trust in government's benevolence in predicting citizens' political participation. Compared to trust in government's ability, we find that trust in government's benevolence and integrity have no influence on participation. However, this difference contradicts research of organizational trust suggesting that benevolence is more important than ability and integrity in constructing trustworthiness, and the results of politics studies showed that perceived corruption can undermine political participation (Lapidot et al., 2007; Theobald, 1989).

Three reasons can explain why trust in government's ability weighs more than trust in government's benevolence and integrity on predicting citizens' political participation. First, in mainland China, the ability of government to promote economic development has become "the sole source of legitimacy in China" (Zhao, 2009, p. 428), and the key source of a high level of political trust (Shi, 2001; Wang, 2005). Thus, in mainland China, when citizens evaluate their trust in government, government's ability becomes a more important indicator than government's benevolence and integrity. Second, the purpose of citizens' contact-type political participation is that government should have enough ability to solve citizens' personal problems or policy problems. Thus, if citizens

believe that government has a strong ability to solve conflicts and problems, they are more likely to be motivated to contact government officials. Third, compared with ability, benevolence is a more affective and subjective concept, and it is hard for citizens to clearly evaluate (Colquitt, LePine, Zapata, & Wild, 2011; McAllister, 1995); The measurement of integrity in this study focuses only on the “perceived corruption condition”, but some Chinese citizens might discount the anti-corruption campaign as nothing more than a “political purge” that has little association with their lives (Banyan, 2014, Dec.). Thus, on contact-type political participation, citizens may tend to take ability, the more concrete and objective factor, into account to ensure effectiveness and their own benefits.

The moderating role of dialogic propinquity

Second, we extend the literature on political trust – political participation by demonstrating that the level of perceived government propinquity conditions the relationship between political trust and contact-type political participation. Specifically, we found that, in mainland China, the more citizens trust their government’s ability, the higher their willingness to conduct contact-type participation under conditions of high perceived dialogic propinquity. Under conditions of low perceived dialogic propinquity, however, trust in government’s ability had no predictive effect on citizens’ willingness to participate in contact-type political activities. Also, compared with the dimension of ability, perceived dialogic propinquity fails to moderate the relationships between trust in government’s benevolence and integrity, and contact-type participation.

Obviously, trust in government’s ability itself is not enough to motivate citizens to engage in political participation. In fact, trust in government’s ability coupled with a favorable environment of active dialogic propinquity is needed to produce political actions. Furthermore, the insignificant relationship between trust in government’s ability and contact-type political under the low perceived dialogic propinquity level suggests that improving dialogic communication would improve trust.

This finding implies that citizens’ contact-type political participation stemming from political trust happens if government can create a dialogic environment in which citizens can connect with government. More importantly, such dialogic environment can enhance the relationship between citizens and government, which is found to be important in the East Asian context (Huang, 2006; Huang & Zhang, 2013). In fact, contact-type political participation is beneficial to the relationship between citizens and government in mainland China. First, government can address citizen-government conflicts by encouraging citizens to employ contact-type participation, because contact-type participation appears less intensive and fierce than protest-type participation which easily leads to social instability and erosion of legitimacy. Second, if mainland Chinese citizens hold a relatively high level of trust in government, they are more likely to participate in political issues. Thus, the mainland Chinese government ought to adopt a dialogic strategy to strengthen the effect of high political trust on contact-type participation as a way to handle government-citizen conflicts effectively and peacefully.

Generally speaking, results of this article have contributed to strategic communication through identifying the role of propinquity on influencing political participation in the Chinese context. Unlike in the Western context, propinquity fails to directly enhance people’s intention to participate in political issues; instead, the contribution of propinquity lies in supporting the trust-participation relationship. This implication might result from the special conceptualization of propinquity; since China today scarcely has “two-way” and “real-time” dialogue, the “perceived propinquity” in this study actually represents the government’s attitude to conduct “true” dialogic communication. From this perspective, this study also illustrates how dialogic principles are transferred and adapted in the Chinese context.

Could dialogic propinquity be a mediator?

Although we examined the relationship that puts political trust as an independent variable, perceived dialogic propinquity as a moderator, and political participation as a dependent variable, existing literature indeed suggests that political trust could affect people’s perception of government in terms

of external political efficacy, which then leads to political participation (De Moor, 2015; Hood, 2006; Rawlins, 2008; Zhong, 2014). We thus conducted *post hoc* analysis to see if a meditation model could provide an alternative to the proposed moderation model in our study. The following statistical analyses were conducted. First, partial correlational analysis found that dialogic propinquity had low correlation with trust in government's ability ($r = .28, p < .001$), no correlation with trust in government's benevolence ($r = .00, p = .87$), and low correlation with trust in government's integrity ($r = .39, p < .001$). After controlling the effects of eight variables that include age, gender, income, education level, political status, social trust, social networks and political news reading frequency. Mediation analysis thus revealed that dialogic propinquity is not powerful enough to serve as the mediator between political trust and political participation.

The results show that there is no mediation effect between trust in government's ability and contact-type participation. Further, the indirect effect of trust in government's ability on contact-type political participation via perceived dialogic propinquity is not significant ($B = -.002, 95\% CI = -.01 \square .01, Sobel p = .62$). Likewise, perceived propinquity also does not bridge the gap between trust in government's benevolence and integrity, and political participation. The results also show that the indirect effect of trust in government's benevolence on contact-type political participation via perceived dialogic propinquity is not significant ($B = -.002, 95\% CI = -.01 \square .01, Sobel p = .63$), as well as trust in government's integrity ($B = .001, 95\% CI = -.01 \square .01, Sobel p = .65$).

Combining the results from the current study and post hoc finding, it should be concluded that perceived dialogic propinquity effectively moderates the effects of political trust on political participation but is not viable enough to mediate such links.

Dialogic communication can be strategically adopted in the context of mainland china

Pragmatically, by exemplifying the effects of perceived propinquity, results of this study indicate why it is important for the Chinese government to adopt strategic communication principles to strengthen citizens' connection with government. This finding points out that even an authoritarian regime such as mainland China's still needs strategic communication to maintain citizens' attachment and relationship with government, this means that government public affairs experts have an important role to play in government-citizen interaction. Thus, we propose that strategically adopting some basic principles of dialogic communication would benefit the relationship between citizens and government.

Admittedly, our research mainly examines the moderating effect of citizens' perceived dialogic propinquity from government. Since the perceived dialogic propinquity concerns how government's responsiveness and transparency influence citizens' perception about government, this study also suggests that responsiveness and transparency can be important indicators of dialogic communication. Therefore, to enhance dialogic communication, it might be helpful for the Chinese government to adopt strategies such as online response or information disclosure. To be specific, the Chinese government has applied some communication practices following dialogic principles to reach out to citizens. It uses official social media accounts to provide public service and to interact with citizens (Zheng, 2013). It is promoting e-government services to enhance perceived transparency (Jun, Wang, & Wang, 2014). Moreover, in 2016, the Chinese State Council issued the "Opinions on Comprehensively Advancing the Work of Open Government". This newest policy highlights several ways that the government plans to show responsiveness and transparency:

- First, five sections of information should be more transparent — policy decision, execution, management, service and results.
- Second, key policies and reforms must be open to public discussion before they are officially sealed, and government should build a mechanism that invites stakeholders, public representatives, specialists and the media to discuss government affairs.

- Third, government should actively respond to social concerns, collect public opinions and explain policies more effectively to the public.
- Fourth, government should release relevant information in a timely manner.

Improved interaction with citizens may prove especially important in dealing with the increasing tempo of social conflicts between citizens and government that arise from rapid changes in mainland Chinese society (Cai, 2008). The Chinese government must take the lead on this, as it must encourage citizens to overcome their authoritarian value and engage in political life. The mainland Chinese government tends to approach dialogic propinquity as mostly entailing one-way communication, a strategy that scholars criticize as inadequate (Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, from the perspective of strategic communication, scholars ought to consider “all conceptualizations of communication processes, including the actions of communications professionals and models, regardless of whether they conceptualize communications as either a one-way or interactive process” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 22). Thus, it is accepted that some basic principles of dialogic communication can be strategically organized and adopted by government to enhance its relationship with its citizens. For the Chinese government, although adopting the concept of dialogue in administration is still at a basic level, there is much potential for government and citizens to build a valuable connection.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although our research contains important theoretical and practical implications, it is limited by several factors. The first limitation concerns methodology. Our study focused on mainland China, a one-party authoritarian regime, so the results may not apply in other cultural contexts. For example, it would be worthwhile to broaden the research to cover other types of regimes in the Greater China cultural context – Hong Kong’s electoral authoritarian regime, and Taiwan’s liberal democracy.

Several limitations of this study are inherent in the nature of the data. First, the five-year-old ABS survey data is a bit dated; we recognized this limitation but decided to use it anyway in view of the importance of the research subject. We believe the findings can shed valuable light for cross validation of future studies. Second, the dependent variable in this study is measured by a 4-points Likert-type scale, which is sometimes considered as an ordinal variable and cannot be analyzed by linear regression. Third, it should be noted that the size of the interaction effect is small ($\Delta R^2 = 0.002$). Thus, the results can be considered as suggestive and more studies are recommended to further explore the relevant issues. Fourth, some of the variables examined have low, although still acceptable, reliabilities (George & Mallery, 2003). The reasons for those low reliabilities are two-fold. The number of items measuring contact-type political participation and perceived propinquity are relatively small, (i.e., four and three, respectively). More importantly, some particular measurements might be context-sensitive, which could limit the construct reliability. For example, one item measuring “contact-type political participation” is “contacting newspapers.” In mainland China, all newspapers are officially owned by the Chinese government so we have to include newspapers in government. In modern mainland Chinese society, however, some newspapers indeed have had some changes of ownership and affiliations with the government and that could affect respondents’ perceptions involving the relationship between newspapers and government. Fifth, the variable “trust in government’s integrity” in this study only measures the corruption condition; future studies should include other aspects of integrity-based trust, such as fairness or morality. Sixth, the “perceived dialogic propinquity” measurement includes two dimensions, i.e., responsiveness and transparency, which may reduce respondents’ perceived consistency of dialogic propinquity. Moreover, it should be noted that based on the definition of dialogic propinquity, the nature of dialogic propinquity is two-way. In this study, we mainly focus on one side of dialogic propinquity, that is, how government shows its dialogic propinquity to publics. In the current context of mainland China, it is difficult to achieve a complete two-way and synchronous dialogue between citizens

and government. Instead, if government takes the initiative to adopt some basic principles of dialogic engagement to engage with publics, it is more likely that citizens and government will engage with each other deeply in two-way and synchronous dialogue in the future.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this study contributes significantly to a helpful depiction of the landscape of political trust and dialogic communication in mainland China and serves as a starting point for future studies. Several future research directions present themselves. For instance, our study did not take into account the dialogic principles of mutuality, empathy, risk and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Future study may want to see if these and the overall level of dialogue also act as moderators or perform other roles in the trust–contact type participation relationship. Moreover, it would be interesting to evaluate whether propinquity, especially two-way propinquity, or other dialogic principles would also impact other types of political participation in the Chinese context, such as protesting or petitioning.

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