

BUILDING TRUST IN GOVERNMENT IN CHINA

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SOURCES OF THE PEOPLE'S TRUST IN GOVERNMENT IN CHINA

In October 2007, the Department of Forestry of the Shaanxi provincial government released a number of pictures taken by citizen Zhou Zhenglong regarding the activities of some southern China tigers, which many people generally believe to be extinct. This was a small event among the millions of events taking place in China everyday. Had it taken place years ago, it probably would have disappeared and vanished quietly, like millions of other such events. However, this event unexpectedly developed into a storm of questions from citizens throughout the country to the Department of Forestry. Several people questioned the authenticity of the pictures, causing a vast repercussion on the Internet. The mainstream mass media later joined the questioning. The Department of Forestry was forced to respond, although it did not provide a well-grounded answer. The storm of questioning grew larger and became unstoppable. It was still growing when I began to write this paper in early February. Knowing that the data released by the government had been questioned by citizens, we can fairly say that an increasingly critical citizenry and a decreasing level of people's trust in government in China

crystallized in a suspicion that the pictures of the tigers were fake.

Needless to say, it is disastrous if people do not have any trust in government. Most governmental activities require the cooperation of the people. On the one hand, without the people's cooperation, governments would be either unable to implement their policies and/or measures, or the costs of implementing them would be unbearable. But, on the other hand, it can also be considered disastrous if people completely trust the government without any questioning. In such a case, they lack any critical attitude toward the government, and the government can degenerate into making arbitrary and bad policies. In fact, a dynamic a society needs the people's trust in government but also needs a certain level of distrust. Only with a healthy level of trust and distrust can government serve the people with the prerequisite humility.

People's trust in government has both a cultural and social dimension, namely, trust varies according to the cultural and social contexts. The same quantitative level of trust in different cultural and social contexts will result in qualitative differences.

For example, in China's long history of thousands of years, the state authorities usually imposed a heavy tax burden on the people; there was much corruption among officials; and there were few possibilities for the implementation of justice. Negative descriptions of the state authorities can be found in the novels,¹ operas,² music, poems,³

¹ Three of the so-called four classical novels—*Shui Hu Zhuan* (Outlaws of the Marsh), *Xi You Ji* (Journey to the West), and *Hong Lou Meng* (A Dream of Red Mansions, or The Story of the Stone) document the official corruption and the downtrodden state throughout the dynasties.

² One of the best-known operas is *Dou Er Yuan* (Snow of June), which describes how easy it is for the innocent to be persecuted.

³ There are many poems lamenting the ill-doings of officials and the state. Du Fu is recognized as one of the leading realistic poets in Chinese history throughout the dynasties.

archives,⁴ folk arts, etc. that have been circulating among the people for centuries.

In the cultural and social contexts developed from this long history, people have few expectations of government. They have low level of trust in government, but are easily satisfied with government as long as it does some good things for the people. Thus, although in other countries trust in government might only be built by active behavior by the government, in China trust in government can grow if the government refrains from intervening in the people's lives.

The lack of state benevolence is also shown in the lack of paternalism in present-day China. Led by the Communist Party, China can be labeled a paternalistic state. Paternalism was one of the fundamental features of the Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the former Soviet Union before the 1990s (Kornai, 1980).⁵ However, the current state in China is not and has never been paternalistic. Although there was social security covering all citizens in the former socialist states in the CEE and the former Soviet Union, social security in China prior to the late 1990s only covered the state sector, consisting of less than 20 percent of the population. The state has been trying to extend social security coverage to the non-state sector in the 2000s, but only urban citizens, less than 40 percent of the total population, are included. The rural population must take care of its own medical care and pensions, as well as provide partial support for elementary education.

⁴ Classical history books such as *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* (Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government) and *Er Shi Si Shi* (History of the Twenty-four Dynasties) document innumerable disasters caused or exacerbated by officials in history.

⁵ Janos Kornai, *Economics of Shortage* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1980).

Moreover, the state broke many of its promises. Instead of economic progress, there were famines in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Instead of the peace and harmony among the people, society was traumatized by cruel class struggle.

As a result, negatively, people had a lower level of trust in the government; but positively, the people also had a lower level of expectations of the government, thus allowing them to be more easily satisfied.

Also, in the context of Chinese culture and history, the most important source or the most efficient way of promoting people's trust in government is economic development or improvements in the people's living standards. When there is economic development, most people tend to have an increased trust in government, regardless of the official corruption. But when there is an economic recession, distrust in the government tends to grow.

Government performance in bringing justice also significantly affects the people's trust. Among the millions of interactions among citizens and between citizens and government, there are inevitable conflicts. If the government (in a broad sense, since the judiciary has not been separate from the administration since 1912) does not distribute justice, people lose their trust in government. Similar to the situation during the imperial period of Chinese history, this is also an important factor affecting the level of trust in government today.

The integrity of government officials helps support the people's trust in government. When there is good performance in terms of economic development, people will be

concerned about the integrity of officials. Corruption is generally an impediment to economic development. But in some special periods and under some special circumstances, some types of corruption might parallel economic development (Nye, 1967).⁶ People lose trust in government when they encounter corruption in their daily lives or when large number of corruption cases are exposed and publicized, regardless of whether there is economic development. When there is no economic development, the same level of corruption will cause a higher level of distrust in government.

A new development in today's China is that people are much more educated, and, more importantly, they have much more access to all kinds of platforms for information flows, such as traveling, radio, television, wired and mobile phone services, and the Internet. They are no longer satisfied with just the end-results of government policies. They also want to know and express their views on the process of policy making and implementation. Thus transparency has become an increasingly important factor that affects the people's trust in government. The more transparent government policy, the more trust the people will have in government.

The extent to which a government's promises materialize affects the people's trust. When the government promises materialize, the people's trust will be boosted. When the government often breaks its promises, the people's trust will usually decline. In its early years of governing the country, the Communist Party made many promises but they

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, "Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1967), pp. 417-427.

remained unfulfilled. The resultant disillusionment caused a high level of distrust in the government after China opened its doors to the outside world and the Chinese people discovered the vast differences between China and the advanced world. From this bitter lesson, the state began to be more cautious in making promises to the people, thus contributing to maintaining their trust in government. Against the backdrop of the favorable situation in which there is no obvious alternative, the ruling Communist Party can have the privilege of not making too many promises, which differs from the situation for a party in a competitive electoral system.

THE BALANCE SHEET OF THE PEOPLE'S TRUST IN GOVERNMENT IN CHINA

By examining the sources of the people's trust in government or the factors that affect the people's trust, we can preliminarily evaluate the level of people's trust in government in China.

The rapid economic growth in the past three decades has strongly boosted the people's trust in government. Since the reform and opening policy of 1978, the average annual economic growth rate in China has been 9.67 percent.⁷ This is probably the

⁷ See Liu Zheng, "Gaige kaifang yilai Zhongguo jingji nianjun zengzhang da 9.67%" (The Annual Growth Rate in China Reaches 9.67% since the Reform and Opening), Xinhua Net, March 1, 2008.

longest and fastest economic growth in the past three hundred years in China. The living standards of ordinary people have been improving continuously. In the late 1970s when the reform and opening policies began, people had few electronic devices or durable commodities, no access to telecommunications or convenient transportation, and scarce access to education or health care. By the mid-2000s, the situation had changed dramatically. People now have much better education and health care. Telecommunications are widespread. Developments in transportation allow people to travel much more easily. Housekeeping has been facilitated for many families through the purchase of electronic devices and other commodities. As a result, life expectancy has increased from 67 in 1978 to 72 in 2006. Poverty has been declining significantly. The poverty rate decreased from 30.7 percent in 1978 to 2.3 percent in 2006, and the number of people living in poverty declined from 250 million in 1978 to 21 million in 2006.⁸

Due to the rapid economic growth and vast improvements in living standards, the people's trust in government has increased significantly. People are now much more positive about the government. Generally, any call to overhaul the government is not accepted by the people, who believe that the present government is doing well and doubt that any alternative could perform any better.

With its increased resources, the government can take actions to look after the population. One example is the expansion of social security. As mentioned above, before

⁸ Gao Shangquan, "Zhiyou gaige kaifang caineng fazhan Zhongguo" (Only through Reform and Opening Can China Develop), *Zhongguo Jingji Shibao* (China Economics Daily), November 30, 2007.

1978, the state social security program only covered those working in state-owned enterprises and state organizations, constituting less than 20 percent of the population. Since the late 1990s, however, social security coverage has been extended to all people in the urban areas, including those working in the private sector. It is also being gradually extended to the rural areas, first to cover the elderly. However, the extension to the rural areas is still at an experimental stage and there is no unified scheme throughout the country. Although only a small proportion of the rural population is covered by social security and the benefit package for the rural areas is substantially smaller than that for the urban areas, more people are being taken care of by the government, thus boosting the people's trust in the government.

The abolition of the agriculture tax has also substantially boosted the people's trust in government. This took place in 2005, affecting at least 60 percent of the population. Historically, Chinese peasants living in the countryside have always been subject to state extractions. With the unprecedented abolition of the agriculture tax, their trust in government grew dramatically.

Two setbacks in economic development had a negative impact on the people's trust in government, thus reinforcing the importance of economic growth to uphold the people's trust. One was the negative impact of the high inflation in 1988. The other was the negative impact of the growth of the unemployment rate that accompanied the SOE restructuring in the late 1990s.

In 1988, after ten years of gradual reform, the government attempted to implement a

major reform to liberalize the planned economy. This resulted in the first high rate of inflation since 1949. There was a panic among the population, and resentment against the government soared, leading to the political turmoil of 1989.

In the mid-1990s, due to the intense competition from the private sector and FDI, the inefficient SOEs began to incur huge losses. The government launched a reform effort to restructure the loss-making SOEs. Some were closed down; others were privatized; and others were either merged or streamlined. Many workers were laid off due to the restructuring, thus greatly increasing unemployment. The laid-off workers had to turn to sources other than the state for help, which formed a hotbed for the popularity of some mysterious religious groups, e.g., the Falun Gong. People's distrust in government finally erupted in the conflict between the Falun Gong followers and the state in the late 1990s.

Since the late 1970s, there have been two big political unrests in China, in which people's distrust in government reached a peak. Both these events were caused by problems of economic development, thus reinforcing the idea that as long as there is economic growth that is beneficial to the people, the people will basically be satisfied with and have trust in the government.

Although the government in China has the basic trust of the people, there are still many problems that can damage this trust. The following five factors have been contributing to a decline in the people's trust in the government.

First, the rampant corruption among officials is damaging the people's trust. According to data released by the Supreme Procuratorate, over the past five years,

179,696 corruption cases have been revealed, with the involvement of 209,487 officials.⁹

The amount of money involved in each case has become greater and greater.

Compared with other countries, China faces a serious challenge due to the corruption. According to the 2006 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, among the 180 countries studied, China ranked number 72. The growing tensions between the people and officials in a number of regions in large part are due to the rising corruption in recent years.

Second, the government's forceful efforts to extract extra resources from the people have also damaged the people's trust. Since the mid-1990s, basically due to the tax reform of 1994 that centralized fiscal revenues without centralizing expenditure responsibility, local authorities, in particular governments at the township and the county levels, have not had sufficient funds to cover their increasing expenditures. Local governments try any means to extract resources from the people. In some regions, local governments may use unlawful and illegal means to extort resources, even though this contravenes the policies of the central government. In these regions, the people trust the central government, but they are highly suspicious of the local governments.

Third, bureaucratic red tape has also damaged the people's trust in government. To get anything accomplished, the people must go through many bureaucracies. For instance, in the 1980s 300 stamps from different administrative organizations were required to start a business. Five or six administrative procedures were required to

⁹ Xinhua News Agency, March 10, 2008.

register a marriage. Dealing with so many unresponsive administrative organizations is not only frustrating, but it also destroys the people's trust in government.

Fourth, unfair treatment in the courts also negatively affects the people's trust in government. With the development of a market economy since the 1980s and with a rising awareness of rights, there are increasing conflicts of interest among the people and between the people and the government; moreover, people are increasingly active in attempting to defend their interests. Therefore, there are an increasing number of disputes that have to be arbitrated by the courts or administration. But because the courts and the administration lack professionalism and are insufficiently impartial, it is difficult for the people to receive justice. Frustrations over the injustices in the system reduce the people's trust in government.

A new additional factor that affects the people's trust in government is their low level of participation in the political process. Initially, this was not an important factor because of the lack of a culture of participation. However, since the 1980s, due to the fact that people are better educated and have more access to outside information about the third wave of democratization throughout the world, people have begun to demand increased political participation. They are no longer merely satisfied with the final policy results; they now want to know how decisions are made and how they are implemented. They also wish to have a say in the policy-making process, including the selection of officials. Because of the legacy of the planned economy, the present government in China is a top-down structure that lacks bottom-up participation, thus negatively affecting the

people's trust in government.

To sum up the assets and liabilities in the people's trust in government in China, we have seen that, on the one hand, in general China has a workable level of people's trust in government; on the other hand, China is facing a number of challenges that are negatively affecting the people's trust in government.

MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO PROMOTE THE PEOPLE'S TRUST

To promote the people's trust in government, the Chinese government has taken a number of measures that are enumerated in, but not limited to, the following list. First, the Chinese government has been trying hard to improve market economy institutions and to integrate China into the global economy to ensure sustainable economic growth, which can be seen as the most important factor to uphold the people's trust in government. Second, the Chinese government has been trying to extend social security coverage and to equalize benefit packages to citizens living in different regions. Third, the government has been trying to streamline the bureaucracy to make government more accessible to the people. Fourth, it has intensified its anti-corruption campaign. Fifth, the government is trying to increase the professionalism (and independence) of the judiciary. And sixth, there have been a number of experiments to increase the people's participation in the political process. However, the above measures have not been equally successful in

promoting the people's trust. Let us examine these measures in detail, in particular, how well they have been implemented and how they have impacted on the people's trust in government.

In terms of improving market economy institutions, the Chinese government has been trying to further promote decentralization and deregulation. For example, to speed up the administrative examination and approval process for investment projects, more powers have been delegated to local governments at lower levels. In addition, the procedures for administrative examination and approval have been simplified. The traditional socialist ideology that was hostile to the private sector and individual initiatives has become more flexible. Protection of property rights was written into the constitution in 2004, and officials are encouraged to make efforts to facilitate economic activities. Those officials who are successful in promoting economic development also have much better chances for career advancement.

More FDI has been attracted to China, and China has been continuously trying to integrate with the global economy. After entering the WTO, China accelerated opening its industries one by one to the world market. By the end of last year, foreign trade amounted to 70 percent of GDP,¹⁰ and in the last several years China has been attracting a large volume of FDI. Over the past three decades, China has been transformed from an economy that was almost totally isolated from the outside world to one that is deeply

¹⁰ Mou Xinsheng, "Guanyu dangqian woguo duiwai maoyi fazhan ji qi shuncha wenti de yixie sikao" (Some Thoughts on Our Foreign Trade and Surplus), *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth), No. 5 (2007).

integrated with the world economy.

Although the vested interests of the highly planned economy have been trying, sometimes with success, to impede the deregulation, decentralization, and global integration, the market economy institutions have been improved significantly and the economy has been further integrated into the global economy. As long as the economic growth continues, the people will continue to have a strong trust in government, as it has already been shown that sustained economic growth is most efficient in promoting the people's trust in government.

The government has also taken measures to streamline the bureaucracy to make it more accessible and responsive to the needs of the people. Since the 1980s, the government has been trying to simplifying administration over social life such as marriage registrations, passport applications, residence registrations, contacting the police, and pension transfers, and so on. Many local governments have initiated the innovation of one-stop shopping for administrative matters to facilitate accessibility and convenience.

It is now less possible for the bureaucracies to ignore the people's needs. There are now deadlines for every bureaucracy to answer any citizen's queries. If a request is rejected, the bureaucracy must supply the reason. If a citizen thinks that a particular official's attitude was bad, he/she can appeal to the specific sector within the administration that monitors the work style of officials. Thus bureaucracy has been changing from an overly complicated, non-responsive, and usually arrogant entity to a

more efficient organization that is more user-friendly and more accessible to the people.

Although there is much room for improvement and the government is still making efforts to improve the accessibility and responsiveness of the bureaucracy, there have been great achievements in this regard. People seem much more satisfied with this administrative reform. Thus, by streamlining the bureaucracy, the Chinese government has won the people's trust.

In the 1980s, trust in government was negatively affected by the unprofessional judiciary that few citizens believed in. People seldom thought of going to the courts to settle disputes or to seek remedies. Today, although there is still a very long way to go for the judiciary to be able to provide full justice for citizens, the judiciary has been significantly improved.

It is well known that before the late 1980s, most judges and prosecutors were recruited from among the demobilized military officers who had no systematic legal education. Based on their backgrounds, they were more inclined to make judgments according to political criteria rather than legal standards, thus leading to a strong suspicion of the judiciary among the citizenry. However, this situation has been changing. Since the late 1980s, judges and prosecutors are no longer recruited from among people who do not have any professional legal education. Beginning in the mid-1990s, judges and prosecutors with higher educations gradually replaced those former military officers.

A similarly dramatic change accelerating the professionalism of the judiciary has been the change in the status of lawyers. Before the early 1990s, all lawyers were state

employees. But since the early 1990s, most law firms have been privatized.¹¹ Although there are still some lawyers employed by the state, their number is declining, and most lawyers are independent professionals. Their reputations depend on their capacity to argue on behalf of their clients, in civil cases against other lawyers and in criminal cases against prosecutors. One of the immediate effects of this change has been that court debates have become more intense and more professional.

There is no doubt that there are still major problems facing the judiciary. One major problem is that the local courts are still part of local government, and their budgets and personnel are decided by the local governments. Thus, when a local government is involved in a legal case, it is very difficult to have justice served. Nevertheless, the increasing professionalism in the judiciary has been promoting people's trust in government. Yet, there is still a lot of work to be done in this regard.

Because corruption damages the people's trust in government, the Chinese government has been intensifying its anti-corruption campaign. Many more cases of corruption have been revealed, and higher-level officials have been punished.

However, the number of cases of corruption is still increasing, as is the amount of money involved in each case. This shows that the anti-corruption campaign has yet to achieve its goal. Moreover, it has focused on exposing particular cases and punishing the involved officials, rather than attempting to make institutional changes to prevent future

¹¹ Zhan Yirong, "Qinglizhe shuo lushi zhidu chongjian hou de 28 nian" (Witnessing the 28 Years of Reconstructing the Institution of Lawyers), *Fazhi Ribao* (Legal Daily), July 2, 2007.

corruption. For example, there have been insufficient efforts to provide freedom of the press, a more impartial judiciary, and a more transparent administration to check and balance official activities. Therefore, although the anti-corruption campaign has been intensified, it has had limited effects in upholding the people's trust in government.

With the increasing access to education and information, people are demanding more participation in the political process. The Chinese government is making efforts in this regard to increase transparency and participation to win the people's trust.

In the past, meetings of the people's congresses were always closed. In an increasing number of places, however these meetings are now open to the public. For example, in Guiyang prefecture of Guizhou province, the people's congress took the initiative in the late 1990s to allow citizens to listen in on the debates at the meetings of the prefectural people's congress.¹² Thereafter, other people's congresses followed this example. Similarly, court cases had always been closed, but with the passage of time many more courts have opened their proceedings to the public. In 2007 the provincial supreme court in Zhejiang province broadcast some of its court proceedings live on the Internet.¹³

A major effort to increase participation was the introduction of semi-competitive elections at the local levels in China. Table 1 shows the emergence and spread of semi-competitive elections along time and across the country.

Table 1. The Emergence and Spread of Semi-competitive Elections at Local Levels in

¹² See <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-07-16/162113458523.shtml>

¹³ See <http://news.sohu.com/20070412/n249373541.shtml>

China

| Level | Year of first case | Latest number of cases (between 2003-2006) | Proportion | Location of most cases |
|----------|--------------------|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| County | 2004 | 4 | 0.1% | Jiangsu, Hubei |
| Township | 1995 | More than 2000 | 6% | Sichuan, Yunnan, Hubei, Jiangsu |
| Village | Late 1980s | More than 200,000 | 30% (estimated) | Nationwide |

Note: The table was compiled by the author. See Lai Hairong, "Semi-competitive Elections at the Township Level in Sichuan Province," *China Perspectives*, no.51 (January-February 2004).

Elections in socialist countries are usually single-candidate elections and there is no competition among candidates. People have no choice but to accept the candidate nominated by the party. In semi-competitive elections, although the competition is not between a ruling and opposition party and there is an ideological ceiling to constrain the competition, the people are given a choice and their votes indeed can make a difference. By promoting the semi-competitive elections, the people's participation in the political process has been greatly improved, at least at the local levels, thus increasing the people's trust in government. However, efforts to promote these new practices are not systematic. They are not strongly backed by the central authorities. Therefore, it is still questionable how much effect these innovations will have on promoting the people's trust in government.

In general, the Chinese government has a workable level of trust derived from the rapid economic growth and the improvement in living standards over the past three decades. Since corruption, red-tape bureaucracy, etc. negatively affect the people's trust in government, the Chinese authorities have initiated a number of reforms to increase the efficiency and responsiveness of the bureaucracy, to enhance the professionalism of the judiciary, to improve the integrity of officials, and to extend the social security system to cover more people. Some of these reforms have been basically successful. Others still have a long way to go to achieve their stated goals. At any rate, these reforms have had positive impact on promoting the people's trust in government in China.

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