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Interdisciplinary Social Science Research: Taking Social Mentality as an Example

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Aim of this chapter

This chapter demonstrates how to conduct interdisciplinary research on three types of social mentalities, namely, political nostalgia, online public concerns about class immobility, and political trust. The study of social mentality is relatively complex because it requires researchers to have a certain grasp of political science, sociology, psychology, and computational social science.

Intended readers

The content of this chapter is helpful for master's and doctoral students and young researchers who are interested in engaging in interdisciplinary social science empirical research, especially for those who have similar research interests but do not know how to conduct empirical research.

1. Definition, Classification, and Importance of Social Mentality

As a key dimension of sociological research, social mentality is an open and diverse field, but scholars have not yet formed a unified and standard definition of social mentality. In a widespread sense, social mentality covers (1) a variety of subjective psychological indicators such as social cognition, emotions, and values; (2) identity (national identity, political identity) and trust (social trust, political trust, social confidence); (3) life satisfaction, happiness, sense of gain and sense of fairness; (4) subjective cognition of social structure, such as subjective social class, perceived social mobility, and sense of identity (see Li, 2024:517-528 for an overview).

There are two main theoretical perspectives on the explanation of social mentality. One is cultural theory, which asserts that the influence of overall cultural values on social attitudes is comprehensive and simultaneous; the other is structural theory, which contends that social structural forces shape attitudes and that this influence is differentiated and structural.

As a barometer of society, studying social mentality is crucial for deeply understanding the context of social development and management. It not only reflects people's psychological state and value orientation but also indicates potential trends and multi-dimensional challenges of social development.

2. Studying Social Mentality Using Big Data

The use of big data has provided unprecedented opportunities for social mentality research. By analyzing massive big data, we can reveal the complex correlational and causal relationships between social mentality and various macro and micro factors, including the economy, social culture, and political factors. Thus, we can enhance the understanding of the causes and consequences of social mentality, thereby improving the level of national governance and guiding the healthy development of society.

2.1 Example 1: Analysis of the Political Nostalgia in Contemporary China

We noticed that since 2008, a very large-scale "Sing Red, Strike Black" campaign (Chang Hong Da Hei, 唱红打黑) has emerged in various parts of China. The campaign refers specifically to two controversial political campaigns launched by Bo Xilai, a member of the 17th CPC Central Political Bureau, while serving as Secretary of the Chongqing Municipal Committee. The first was the "Sing Red Campaign," which involved singing red songs, reading classics, telling stories, and spreading wisdom; the second was the "Strike Black" campaign, a special operation in Chongqing to combat organized crime. On March 15, 2012, Bo Xilai was removed from his position as Secretary of the Chongqing Municipal Committee. Zhang Dejiang, then Vice Premier of the State Council, assumed the concurrent role of Secretary of the Chongqing Municipal Committee, bringing the "Sing Red, Strike Black" campaign to a close.

The Singing Red song campaign in Chongqing, Jiangxi, and other places is large-scale and very representative. Since people want to sing revolutionary songs, they will search for the lyrics on online search engines. Researchers can capture the frequency and geographical distribution of online lyrics searches. Taking "singing red" as the research object, we want to answer several core research questions: Is Chongqing the "reddest" place in China? At the provincial level, what macro factors significantly affect the public's nostalgia for the Mao Zedong era, and what are the evolving patterns of the nostalgia for the Mao era? We published a paper entitled "Searching for red songs: the politics of revolutionary nostalgia in contemporary China" in *The China Quarterly* (Li & Yan, 2020). In this paper, we mainly explore the social and political phenomenon of "singing red songs and fighting black" and its macro-influencing factors.

First we divided red songs into three categories: the first category is traditional classic red songs praising the first generation of leadership with Comrade Mao Zedong as the core, such as "Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China", "The East is Red", "On the Golden Mountain in Beijing", "Three Disciplines and Eight Points for Attention", "Ten Farewells to the Red Army", etc., totaling 78 songs; the second category is new red songs praising the second generation of leadership with Comrade Deng Xiaoping as the core, such as "Spring Story", "My Motherland and I", "My Chinese Heart", "We Are Soldiers", "In the Fields of Hope", etc., totaling 44 songs; the third category

is new red songs from the former Soviet Union, such as "Katyusha", "Goodbye, Friend", "Troika", etc., totaling 10 songs. We mainly study the first category of red songs, that is, traditional classic red songs.

Based on the massive data captured from online searches, we constructed a red song search index for different provinces, with the total number of netizens in a province as the denominator and the total frequency of red song searches in that province as the numerator. We drew the first large-scale portrait of contemporary revolutionary nostalgia, and the results are shown in Figure 1. From 2008 to 2014, the frequency of red song searches experienced a significant trend of rapid rise (2008-2009), steady growth (2009-2011), and overall decline (2011-2014). Why did the peak of red song searches occur in 2011? Because it was the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Party, and people from all over the country were either mobilized or spontaneously launched a social campaign of singing red songs.

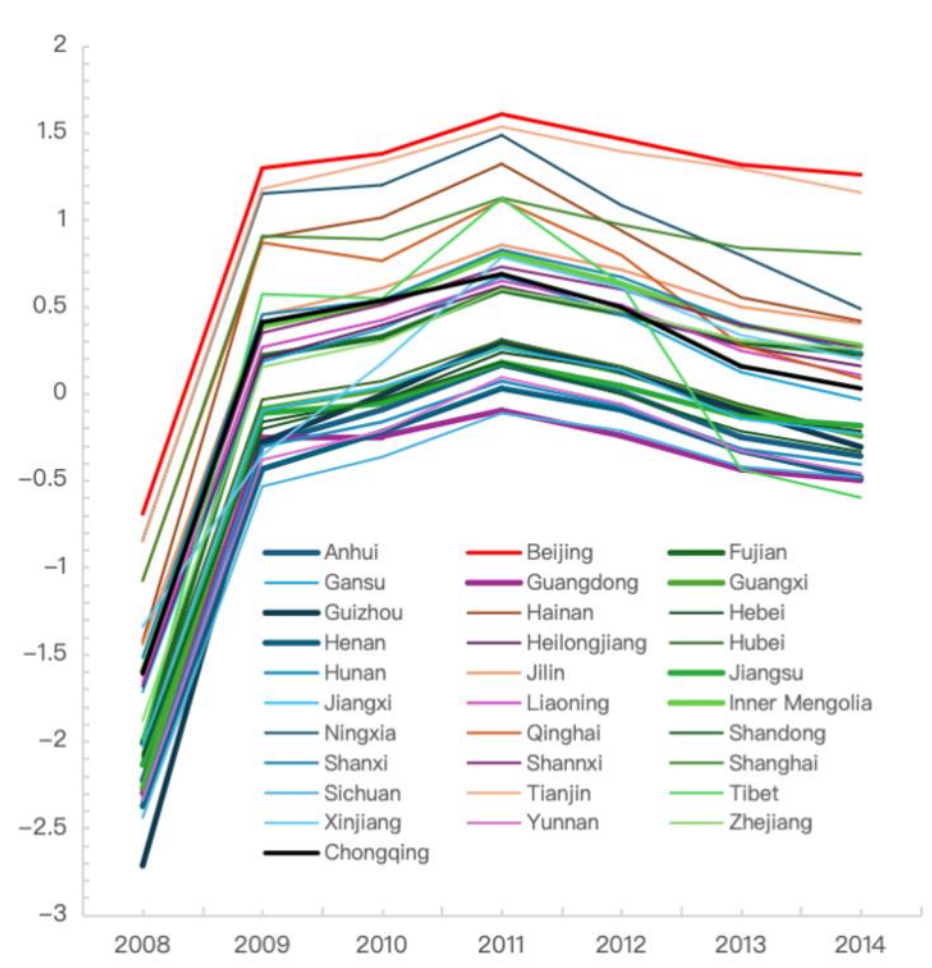


Fig. 1 Trends in political nostalgia among Chinese netizens in various provinces (2008–2014)

In Figure 1, the horizontal axis represents the years, from 2008 to 2014, and the vertical axis represents the intensity of red song searches, which is used to measure the degree of political nostalgia in a provincial administrative region in a specific year. Figure 1 shows that although Chongqing is the birthplace of the red song singing campaign, it is not the "reddest" place. The top three cities with the highest revolutionary nostalgia are Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai, the three municipalities directly under the Central Government. Why is this so? We believe that municipalities directly under the Central Government participate more in "singing red songs" due to their complete and powerful grassroots party organizations, which can effectively mobilize and analyze songs.

We further analyzed the formation mechanism of the nostalgia sentiment. The analysis reveals a similar yet differentiated evolution trend of revolutionary nostalgia among provinces. Notably, regional differences are significant, with the southern region exhibiting weaker red song searches compared to its northern counterparts. For example, residents of Guangdong Province are not particularly keen on searching for and singing red songs.

We also collected data from various statistical yearbooks on economic development, income inequality, educational development, political development, social development (number of NGOs), and social openness (including the number of foreign tourists and total foreign direct investment) in more than 30 provincial-level administrative regions across the country between 2008 and 2014, to explore how these factors affect changes in netizens' levels of revolutionary nostalgia.

The results of dynamic panel data analysis using generalized methods of moments (GMM) show that political nostalgia is significantly affected by a series of socioeconomic factors. There is behavioral inertia behind the act of singing red songs; that is, the search behavior in the previous year significantly affects the search behavior in the next year, and the degree of economic development is not a decisive factor; political nostalgia is closely linked to the public's desire for fair distribution and the nostalgia era. As the saying goes, "The problem lies not in the scarcity of resources, but in the uneven distribution". Contemporary Chinese netizens' nostalgia for the Mao era mainly stems from the polarization between the rich and the poor. This study reveals the complex aspects of social mentality, provides a new perspective for understanding social and political behavior in a specific historical period, and contributes a new methodology to political sociology studies.

2.2 Example 2: Analysis of Public Concerns on Class Immobility among Chinese

Since 2008, there has been a trend of using the word "diaosi" (losers in their careers and romantic relationships) on Chinese social media. Whether it was self-mockery or subjective evaluation of others, this word frequently appeared, which aroused the academic interest of our research team. At the same time, we also noticed a series of class-related words, such as "rich second generation", "poor second generation", "second generation official", "second generation stars" as well as "working class", "middle class", "bourgeoisie", "white, rich and beautiful", "tall, rich and handsome", "short, frustrated

and poor" and other words also occupied an essential position among Internet users at that time. In addition, concepts such as "it is difficult for poor families to have noble sons" and "wealth does not last for more than three generations" were also widely spread. Our core research question is: In what provincial administrative regions are netizens more likely to express concerns and worries about class stratification?

Focusing on this phenomenon, our team published a paper on netizens' concerns about class immobility in Social Indicators Research (Li et al., 2019). We paid special attention to the records of Chinese netizens searching for words such as "official second generation" and "poor second generation" on Baidu from January 2008 to September 2014. As shown in Figure 2, the results show that netizens were most concerned about the "rich second generation", followed by the "official second generation", and finally, the "poor second generation". The concern mobilization peaked in 2012, which profoundly reveals the psychological tendency of the general public.

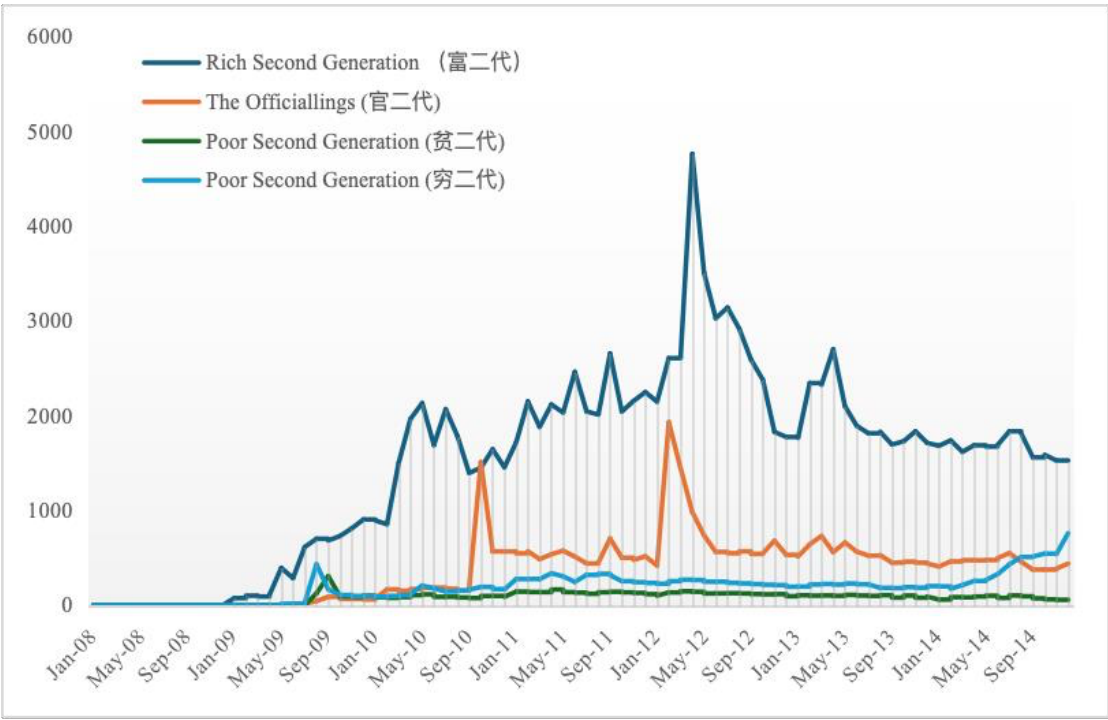


Fig. 2 Rising Search Volume of Immobility-related Words on Baidu

Similar to the first example, we employed the generalized method of moments (GMM) model to empirically explore the macro-influencing factors that affect the attention of netizens in different provinces to class stratification. When the Internet is filled with words reflecting class differences such as "losers", "tall, rich and handsome", "white, rich and beautiful", "short, frustrated and poor", etc., it reflects the public's deep concern about the problem of class stratification. More importantly, we found that income inequality at the provincial level significantly increased netizens' attention to class

stratification, which is one of the main driving forces of attention to class stratification. When controlling for other variables, the more economically developed provinces are, the more netizens pay attention to class stratification. This finding provides new perspectives and evidence for understanding the relationship between social mentalities and economic development.

3. Studying Social Mentality Using Secondary Survey Data

Example: Social Connections and Political Trust

In this study, our research question is: How do formal and informal social relationships affect people's level of political trust? The starting point of the third study comes from the Bi Fujian incident. Mr. Bi is a well-known China Central Television (CCTV) host who made inappropriate remarks about Chairman Mao at a private gathering. After the video was exposed to the public, he was severely punished and fired by CCTV. This incident inspired us: that is, in a relatively closed, informal, and temporary social space, individuals are more likely to express opinions they would not express on formal occasions because, in such a temporary public space, individuals will perceive a relatively high sense of security. As previous studies (e.g., Bahry & Silver 1987) have shown, small private networks and informal connections with high trust within the group can induce more political discussions.

The level of political trust among the public is crucial to the legitimacy and governance capacity of the government. Existing literature mainly studies the impact of formal social relationships on political trust, most of which is limited to Western societies. Scholars have proposed that the effects of social connections on political trust depend mainly on the specific sociocultural background, which inspires us to examine the effectiveness of social relationships in a specific sociocultural background. As shown in Fig. 3, our study aims to expand this research topic by studying formal and informal social relationships, exploring their influence mechanisms and possible alternative explanations, and preliminarily establishing a causal relationship between social relationships and the level of political trust. The research results were published in the *Journal of Contemporary China* (Chen et al., 2020).

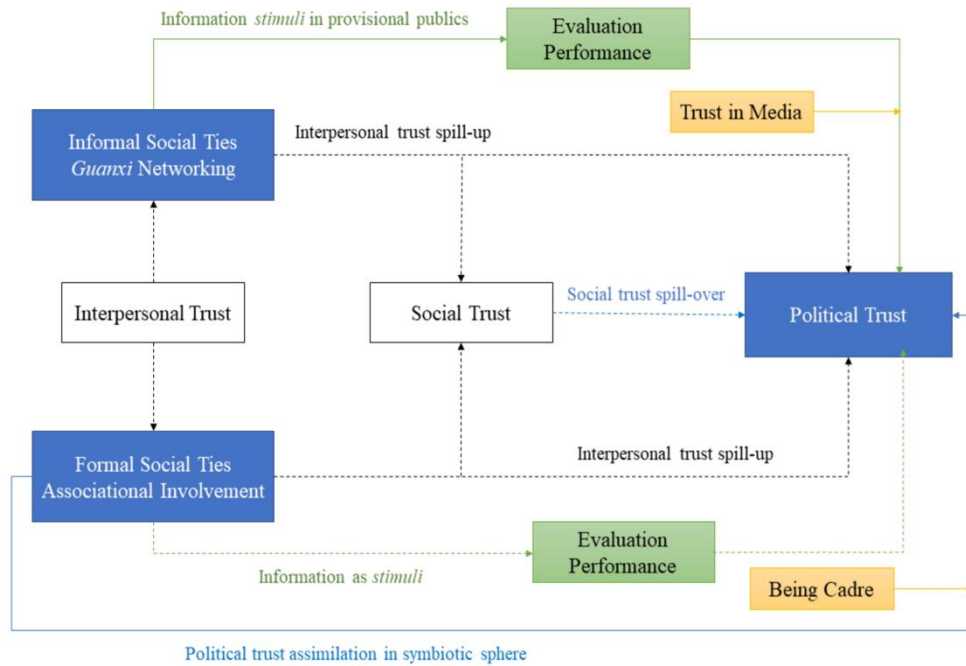


Fig. 3 Hypotheses and Mechanisms of How Social Connections Affect Political Trust in China

We divided people's social participation into formal and informal. We assumed that the frequency of informal social interaction is negatively correlated with people's political trust level. There are three main reasons for this: First, during the period of social transformation, China's increasingly severe socioeconomic inequality has made people more aware of justice and uneven income distribution and further reduced personal political trust; second, information or rumors about political corruption are often the favorite topics among members of these informal groups; third, gossip is an essential channel for expressing mutual trust and mutual affection. Since social eating is the most crucial way to develop and maintain informal connections in China, we use social eating as an example to illustrate the relationship culture (Bian, 2001). Social networks, especially social eating, always create small, temporary, and often semi-open circles, thus allowing the spread of political information within small groups. Based on this, we propose our first research hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: The higher the frequency of informal social interaction, the lower the level of political trust among the public.

Through literature review, we found that in Western societies, the degree of individual participation in formal associations, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is

significantly negatively correlated with their trust in the state (Kim, 2005; Espinal et al., 2006). This phenomenon has been evidenced in many countries, including North America and South Korea. Is it the same in China? In particular, a unique symbiotic relationship exists between Chinese NGOs and the government, fundamentally different from Western NGOs' position.

Since 1980, NGOs providing social services have emerged in China. Among the 8 million NGOs in China, 7 million are social organizations under the government's leadership from top to bottom, and 1 million are grassroots NGOs from bottom to top. Since various NGOs in China are mainly composed of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), they are not quite the same as the third sector of the public sphere as it is known abroad, but are part of what we call the symbiotic field, which is composed of the dominant state and state-led social organizations.

Given the symbiotic relationship between GONGOs and the state, participation in GONGOs may positively affect the level of political trust. Frequent involvement in GONGOs will generate high-frequency interactions within or near the symbiotic field of government-society and encourage participants to gradually accept the mainstream political culture dominated by government agencies, thereby improving political trust.

As for grassroots NGOs, although in theory they have neither official support nor close ties with the government, more involvement in grassroots NGOs may not improve, but rather reduce, the level of political trust. However, in China, the development of grassroots NGOs depends mainly on the common needs of NGOs and the state. Some scholars have proposed the concept of "contingent symbiosis" to describe this delicate relationship (Spires 2011). For example, many participants in grassroots NGOs will not express anti-government demands; some grassroots NGOs even try to achieve their organizational goals by taking advantage of differences in policies among governments at different levels and choosing the central or provincial governments as allies.

I have served as an expert in evaluating social organizations in Guangdong Province. I observed that party building occupies a core position in the organizational evaluation system. If a social organization's party building is not well-maintained, achieving a qualified (AAA) grade is not easy. Hence, the degree of political assimilation of organizations in China is very high. This triggered our academic thinking on whether participation in formal associations in the Chinese context enhances government trust, and based on this, we proposed the second research hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive correlation between formal social participation and political trust because the symbiotic field promotes the assimilation of political trust.

Table 1. Models Predicting Political Trust Using Social Connections

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Trust in Government	Trust in Police	Trust in Courts	Trust in Residents' Committee	Composite Index of Political Trust
	OProbit	OProbit	OProbit	OProbit	OLS
Social Connections					
<i>Guanxi</i> Networking	-.023(.008)**	-.022(.006)***	-.014(.006)*	-.018(.005)***	-.082(.022)***
Associational Involvement	.028(.007)***	.015(.006)**	.014(.006)*	.023(.004)***	.065(.021)***
Social Resources (Times100)	.003(.016)	.004(.014)	-.022(.014)	-.021(.012)	-.138(.057)*
Male	-.003(.013)	-.021(.010)	-.017(.010)	-.006(.008)	-.043(.038)
Age	.003(.001)***	.001(.0006)	.0002(.0006)	.001(.0004)*	.006(.002)**
<i>Educational Attainment</i>					
High School	-.073(.033)*	-.061(.025)*	-.044(.025)	-.017(.017)	-.229(.083)**
College or More	-.118(.036)**	-.073(.027)**	-.073(.028)**	-.023(.019)	.357(.098)***
Rural <i>Hukou</i> (Migrants)	.033(.024)	.060(.017)**	.020(.017)	.011(.014)	.091(.076)
Family Annual Income	.002(.007)	.005(.005)	.005(.005)	.002(.004)	.038(.022)
Divorced	-.013(.016)	-.002(.012)	-.002(.012)	-.017(.010)	-.035(.047)
Health	.025(.006)**	.013(.005)**	.020(.005)***	.008(.004)*	.071(.018)***
CCP Member	.027(.017)	.008(.013)	.025(.013)	.018(.010)	.079(.048)*
Employment	.001(.015)	.001(.012)	.010(.012)	-.004(.009)	.052(.044)
Cadre	.019(.016)	.027(.012)*	.014(.012)	.011(.010)	.043(.046)
Religious	-.031(.020)	-.019(.014)	-.021(.015)	-.034(.022)	-.087(.064)
<i>Ownership Sector</i>					
State-Owned (First Job)	.041(.020)*	.024(.016)	.003(.016)	.001(.012)	.034(.061)
State-Owned (Last Job)	.042(.018)*	.030(.013)*	.011(.014)	.024(.011)*	.181(.052)**
Other Sector (Both Jobs)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Industry Dummy (Both Jobs)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
City Dummies	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Cutoff Point 1	-1.795(.341)	-1930(.325)	-2.109(.356)	-2.009(.296)	----
Cutoff Point 2	-.857(.338)	-1.019(.324)	-1.049(.355)	-.908(.292)	----
Cutoff Point 3	.879(.338)	.723(.324)	.707(.355)	1.254(.292)	----
N	2,784	3,374	3,029	3,180	2,879

Note: Average partial effects derived from ordered probits predict the highest political trust category (trust=4); Standard errors in parentheses are robust to heteroscedasticity; Reference groups are: married, employed, less than high school, rural *hukou* (migrants), private sector, agriculture, and Changchun City; p<.05* p<.01** p<.001*** (two-tailed tests).

Based on the survey data from the Chinese Job Search Network Survey, we studied the different effects of informal social dining and formal community participation on political trust. The results show that frequent participation in social eating significantly reduces the respondents' political trust in multiple dimensions, including trust in government, police, courts, and community committees. In contrast, involvement in formal communities has a positive effect. Our research findings challenge the negative correlation between community participation and political trust found in Western society, which is the core contribution of this study.

To deal with the endogeneity problem, we adopted an instrumental variable approach. First, we collected data from the China Statistical Yearbook (2003-2005) to calculate the proportion of catering industry employees in the total employed population in each city each year. Then, we calculated the three-year average index of the local catering industry in each city as an instrumental variable, mainly because the development of the local catering industry before the survey (2009) will affect people's social eating behavior but will not directly affect people's political trust. Second, we used new data from the Spatial Explorer of Religion to obtain the number of all temples, churches, mosques, or monasteries built between 210 and 1949 before the CCP came to power and used this as an instrumental variable for community participation mainly because the number of temples, churches, mosques, or monasteries will increase people's chances of participating in various social organizations, but will not directly affect people's political trust. The analysis results again supported our initial findings after using instrumental variables to deal with the endogeneity problem. We attempted to elucidate the internal mechanisms of China's unique relational culture and the symbiotic patronage relationship between the government and the community.

The main contributions of this study are threefold: first, to examine the relationship between social relations and political trust, we considered the impact of formal and informal dimensions of social relations on political trust; second, we distinguished four types of political trust, namely trust in the government, trust in the police, trust in courts and judges, and trust in neighborhood committees; third, we analyzed the data from the Chinese Urban Job Search Network Survey, and both standard regression analysis and instrumental variable analysis showed that community participation can significantly enhance the level of political trust, while social dining can significantly reduce political trust.

This research results not only supported our two hypotheses but also further confirmed the correctness and necessity of the two policies of the CPC Central Committee on strengthening grassroots party building and curbing spending on eating and drinking, that is, public spending on eating and drinking not only involves waste of resources and corruption but also reduces the public's trust in the government; and strengthening grassroots party building can comprehensively improve the level of political trust of the people.

4. Conclusions and Discussions

This chapter primarily presents three empirical studies on social mentality, conducted by our research team using both big data and traditional data. First, based on the massive data generated by online searches, we draw the first large-scale portrait of political nostalgia in contemporary Chinese society and conduct an empirical analysis of the formation mechanism of nostalgia in each province. For each province, we standardized the search volume of the songs on the most widely used online search engine in China (Baidu) to measure the local level of political nostalgia. We find that the evolution trend of nostalgia among provinces is similar but also differentiated. The results of dynamic panel data analysis based on generalized moments estimation show that socioeconomic factors significantly affect political nostalgia. The results of dynamic panel data analysis (2008-2014) using the generalized show that revolutionary nostalgia is affected considerably by socioeconomic factors, including per capita GDP, income inequality, social and economic development levels, and the degree of globalization. Second, using the same data extraction method and model setting, we study how macro variables at the provincial level affect netizens' concerns about class immobility. We find that income inequality at the provincial level significantly increases netizens' concerns about class immobility. Third, based on the job search network data analysis, we studied the different effects of informal social dining and formal community participation on the level of political trust. The study found that informal social dining would reduce the level of confidence, while formal community participation would increase the level of trust. Our study challenges the negative correlation between participation in NGOs and political trust in Western society. We used instrumental variables to deal with the endogeneity problem, and the analysis results once again supported our preliminary findings. We attempted to elucidate our core research findings in the context of China's unique relational culture and the symbiotic shelter relationship between the government and NGOs.

The author believes there is much room for social mentality research. Social mentality research, which combines big data with traditional surveys and statistical data, offers a new perspective for understanding people's mentality, analyzing social and emotional dynamics, and guiding social governance. In the future, we will continue to deepen research in this field and contribute to a better understanding of people's social mentalities.

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