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Social Capital and Rural Grassroots Governance in China

Min XIA

Abstract: This article examines the impacts of two types of social capital – bonding and bridging – upon the performance of grassroots self-government institutions in rural China, based on an original survey of 410 villages throughout the whole of China. The findings indicate that, on the one hand, bonding social capital still has a very solid foundation in the rural areas of China. On the other, bridging social capital is in formation in Chinese villages, even though the stock of bridging social capital is currently very moderate. Moreover, this study finds that bridging social capital, as manifested in general trust and inclusive social networks, positively affected the governance performance of each surveyed village. Yet, bonding social capital, as manifested in particular trust and exclusive social networks, tends to negatively impact the performance of Chinese rural governance. These findings help clarify some theoretical issues about, and shed some light on the prospects of, the rural self-governance system in China.

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Keywords: rural China, social capital, grassroots governance

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Introduction

Since the notion of social capital was popularized by Coleman (1990) in the early 1990s, there has been a fast-growing body of literature on the political consequences of social capital in both developing and developed settings.¹ In general, this literature suggests that social capital – defined as a set of norms and informal networks among ordinary citizens – has a significant impact on government performance at various levels (for example, Coleman 1990; Putnam 2000; Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Hall 1999; Krishna 2002; Callahan 2005). Yet, scholars are still exploring and debating which type of social capital plays what kind of role in shaping government performance in the different economic and political systems. As William Callahan (2005: 497) points out, as an analytical notion, “social capital runs into many of the same problems as ‘community’, ‘civil society’ and ‘new social movements’” because the concept is still subject to conflicting normative interpretations and inconsistent empirical evidence.

To contribute to this important exploration of, and debate about, the consequences of the various kinds and different aspects of social capital, this study examines the impacts of two types of social capital – bonding and bridging – on the performance of grassroots self-government institutions in rural China. Since studies on the impact of social capital on government performance in China are still scarce,² the findings submitted by this study may also help us to understand the important socio-political implications of social capital in that country. This paper is based on the data collected from a representative survey of household residents living in 410 rural villages throughout the whole of China (see Appendix). In this article, I first review the debate in the cur-

1 This study is supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, and the Research Funds of Renmin University of China (10XNK129, Social Capital and Grassroots Governance in Rural China).

2 A few survey-based studies of social capital in China have emerged recently. For example, works by Tsai (2002 and 2007) examined the impact of a type of social capital such as “solitary groups” on local government performance in rural China based on a survey of 316 villages; the studies by Tang (2005) and Chen and Lu (2007) analysed the effect of social capital as a whole on urban residents’ political values (for example, democratic norms and regime support) and political behaviour (for example, voting) at the individual level. While all these studies provide important insights into the general consequences of social capital in China, they do not deal with the specific impacts of various kinds of social capital on local government performance in rural China.

rent literature on the different impacts of the various types and aspects of social capital, introduce the evolution of the grassroots self-government system in rural China, and conceptualize and operationalize two kinds (bonding and bridging) of social capital along two dimensions (objective networks and subjective norms). I then present measurements of the performance of grassroots self-government institutions in rural China. Finally, I explore the effects of the two kinds of social capital along the two dimensions on the performance of self-government institutions, and conclude with a discussion on the theoretical and political implications of the findings from this study.

Theoretical Context: Two Kinds of Social Capital along Two Dimensions

The concept of social capital originates mainly from studies of Western societies. Although these studies emphasize that there are various aspects of social capital and argue for there being different consequences of these aspects, most of them seemingly agree that social capital consists of at least two major conceptual dimensions (Coleman 1990; Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Knack and Keefer 1997; Newton 1997; Hall 1999; Uslaner 1999; Putnam 2000; Lin 2001; Krishna 2002; Brooks 2005; Halpern 2005; Saxton and Benson 2005; Chen and Lu 2007). These two dimensions may be best characterized by what Paxton (1999) calls “objective associations” and “subjective types of ties” among individuals. The objective associations – or social networks – refer to both formal and informal associations, which are formed and engaged in on a voluntary basis. On the other hand, the subjective ties or norms mainly stand for trust and reciprocal feelings among individuals.

Among these two dimensions of social networks and norms, some scholars make a distinction between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging (Putnam 2000; Knack 2002; Uslaner 2002; Zmerli 2003; Callahan 2005). Bonding social capital and bridging social capital are also utilized as traditional social capital and modern social capital, respectively, in Krishna’s work (Krishna 2002). This study adopts Putnam’s distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Bridging social capital is defined as networks and ties of like persons across diverse social groups – such as loose friendships and colleagues. Bonding social capital refers to ties between like people in

similar situations such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours (for example, closed networks of family and friends).

More importantly, social capital theorists apparently have different views on what impact each of the two types of social capital has on government performance at various levels. Some scholars suggest that both bonding and bridging should be considered two necessary and integral parts of social capital; hence, maintaining a proper balance between these two types of social capital will produce positive consequences for the rule of national or local governments. For example, Putnam and his associates composed an index of social capital, mixing together elements of both bridging and bonding in their study of the Italian democracy (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993).

Other scholars are opposed to this argument. As William Callahan (2005: 495) suggests, scholars have to “examine the quality of social capital and the ethics of each network’s inside/outside distinction”, and thus distinguish between different types of social capital. Furthermore, scholars have to conduct comparative research and examine “how civil social capital interacts with the uncivil social capital of corruption, ethnocentrism and sectarianism”. Lucian Pye also argues that,

[w]hen social capital is positive and constructive, it can produce establishments at either the local or national level, in which elites in different walks of life work together for the common good. When the networking is negative, the result can be a government of corrupt backdoor deals, which, in extreme cases, can end up as mafia rule (Pye 1999: 769).

Francis Fukuyama, Sonja Zmerli and other scholars also suggest that bonding social capital has negative impacts upon the governance of national or local governments (Fukuyama 2002; Zmerli 2003; Nyhan 2000). Stephen Knack and Eric Uslaner argue that only bridging social capital can promote the governance of national or local governments; for them, bonding social capital has no effects on governance (Knack 2002; Uslaner 2002).

To contribute to this critical debate, this study differs from most of the earlier survey-based studies in at least two important ways. Specifically, other studies focus on the consequences of only one of the two dimensions of social capital – either subjective norms (for example, Brehm and Rahn 1997; Knack and Keefer 1997; Uslaner 2002) or objective social networks (for example, Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993; Portney and Berry 1997; Tsai 2007). (There are some exceptions to these

earlier studies. For example, the works by Hall (1999), Krishna (2002) and Knack (2002) dealt with both norms and networks.) This study analyses the effects of both subjective norms and objective networks simultaneously. Moreover, instead of looking at only one type of social capital, it examines the impact of both types of social capital – bridging and bonding – on local government performance. In sum, I explore a more comprehensive conceptual framework in which to operationalize social capital – one that distinguishes the two types of social capital along the two dimensions – and I apply this framework to the analysis of the consequences of both types of social capital.

Grassroots Self-Government in Rural China and the Measurement of Its Performance

In order to better understand the impact of the two types of social capital (along the two dimensions) on the performance of grassroots government in rural China, in this section I will provide an overview of the development of this local governance system. I will then explain how the performance of grassroots government is measured in this analysis.

Evolution of Local Self-Government

For nearly 30 years after the founding of the People's Republic, in 1949, the grassroots organizations in rural China were the “people's communes” (人民公社, *renmin gongshe*), township-based, collective economic organizations in combination with the lowest level of state power. Since the outset of the post-Mao reform era, a new system, the “villagers' committee” (VC, 村民委员会, *cunmin weiyuanhui*), has gradually been established in the rural areas of China, starting after the political system of the people's communes was abolished. The 1982 Chinese Constitution stipulated the nature, tasks and roles of the VC in rural areas. In November 1987, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China adopted the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees of the People's Republic of China, which was revised and enacted in November 1998. According to the Organic Law, the VCs are established on the basis of the place of residence and are usually based on a natural village that is of a proper size and population. Moreover, these VCs, as “mass organizations of self-management” at the grassroots level, are supposed to be elected and regularly held to account by the residents of

the villages, and are considered responsible for administering the socio-economic and political affairs of the villages (Zhong 2003).

The central government sees this system of VCs as a means by which to solve some of the urgent socio-economic and political problems in rural areas, such as economic stagnation and administrative paralysis – both of which emerged in the late period of the Maoist era. The government's underlying rationale is that under this system the VCs should be effective and efficient in maintaining order, implementing central government policies and coordinating agricultural production and other economic activities at the grassroots level (Chen 2005). In addition, these VCs are supposed to be popularly elected; hence, they provide ordinary peasants with abundant opportunities to participate in the management of village affairs.

In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Agriculture, in response to the problem of peasants' burdens, proposed a unitary tax in rural areas. Peasants expressed strong support for this idea. Based on a series of local trials, the Beijing government chose Anhui to experiment with the "tax-for-fee" reform in 2000. In 2001, Jiangsu and Zhejiang joined the experiment, and the programme expanded to 20 other provinces in 2002. In 2003, the central government decided to promote a nationwide tax-for-fee reform. Under this new system, local governments were allowed to collect only one agricultural tax from peasants, and no fees were allowed to be charged. Premier Wen Jiabao announced at the National People's Congress annual conference in early 2004 that the state was planning to phase out the agricultural tax in three years. By February 2005, 26 provinces had already abolished the agricultural tax and by 2006 this tax category had finally disappeared in China (Han 2008).

As a result of these changes, village leaders can no longer raise funds for public projects. According to the new rules decreed by the central government, in order to attain the financial resources necessary to provide basic public goods such as roads, irrigation facilities and infrastructure, village leaders must request permission from the villagers' assembly (村民大会, *cunmin dabui*) or from the villagers' representative assembly (村民代表大会, *cunmin daibiao dabui*). This permission may only be granted on a case-by-case basis (一事一议, *yishi yiyi*).

In 2005, the communist party's central committee announced a new programme of "building new socialist villages" by issuing the decree of "Views for Advancing the Construction of New Socialist Villages". According to this new programme, the system of the VCs was expected to

serve as the foundation for the development of new socialist villages (Qu, Li, and Wang 2006). Meanwhile, the central government has promised to provide the VCs with necessary funds by using financial transfer (财政转移, *caizheng zhuan yi*), since half of the VCs failed to raise public funds through the system of case-by-case permission.

In addition, this programme calls for the deepening of democratic governance in the management of village affairs, especially enhancing the quality of the democratic election of the VCs. All VC members must be democratically selected through the offering of multiple candidates and competitive elections with secret balloting. Moreover, all important matters related to the interests of villagers must undergo deliberation by the villagers, and decisions must be made in accordance with the opinions of the majority.

In sum, in response to socio-economic and political changes in the rural areas of China, the central government has initiated institutional reforms to make the system of the VCs more effective in governing village affairs and more responsive to the villagers' daily demands. This new system of the VCs has set the institutional context in which good governance is achieved in each village.

Measuring Governance Performance

Based on their empirical study of regional governments in Italy, Putnam and his associates (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993: 63) suggest that the performance of a representative government can be measured along two key dimensions: "its responsiveness to its constituents" and "its effectiveness in conducting the public's business". As I have previously discussed, the Chinese government has set up similar criteria for the grassroots self-governance system in rural areas. The central government has called on the representative governing institutions (the VCs) at the grassroots level to be effective in conducting village affairs and to be responsive to the demands of peasants within each village. Therefore, in this study I will adopt the two dimensions as designed by Putnam, in order to measure the performance of local self-government institutions in rural China. Specifically, these two dimensions include the VCs' responsiveness to their constituents and their effectiveness in managing village affairs.

As the institutional core of the rural self-government system, the VCs are supposed to be formed based on popular consent among villagers and should be representative of them. According to the Organic Law,

a VC “shall be the primary mass organization of self-government, in which the villagers manage their own affairs, educate themselves and serve their own needs” (Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees, 1998). Therefore, I will use peasants’ subjective evaluations of the VCs as indicators for the responsiveness of the village governance.

To measure the effectiveness of the village governance, I mainly draw upon how effective the VCs are in providing public goods. Specifically, I have designed an objective scale by which to evaluate the effectiveness of the VCs, based on their expenditure of social welfare and the construction of public goods – such as schools and roads. The detailed information in these indicators comes from the in-person interviews with village leaders from each surveyed village.

Many scholars who have conducted public opinion surveys in China were faced with the question about the reliability of surveys that have been carried out in a non-democratic country such as China. There are four factors that assure the reliability of the public opinion survey in this study. First, the questionnaire was de-sensitized to make sure that there were no politically sensitive questions. Second, the survey was anonymous, and respondents were offered confidentiality terms and encouraged to provide answers that best captured their true feelings. Third, respondents were informed that this survey was conducted by the Department of Sociology at Renmin University of China and was not related to any government agencies. College students from the Department of Sociology at Renmin University of China who had been trained by the project members in field-interviewing techniques before the actual survey was carried out were employed as field interviewers. Fourth, in general, previous empirical studies conducted by other scholars have suggested that Chinese respondents generally feel free to express their views in a public opinion survey (Chen 2004; Shi 1997).

First, I asked peasants in each surveyed village to evaluate the performance of their VC in terms of its responsiveness to its constituents. I used the following statement in the survey:

“In general, our VC represents the interests of the villagers within our neighbourhood, and manages village affairs based on our interests.”

The respondents were asked to rate this statement according to a 5-point scale, with 1 standing for strong disagreement and 5 for strong agreement with it. The average scores for the responsiveness of VCs range from a low of 2.3 to a high of 4.9. The mean of the average scores for the responsiveness of VCs in each surveyed village was 3.8, which is

well above the mid-point of the 5-point scale. The value of this item will be used as the variable responsive to measure the responsiveness of the village governance system in the following analysis. Second, the Organic Law clearly states that the VC

shall manage the public affairs and public welfare services of the village, mediate disputes among the villagers, help maintain public order and convey the villagers’ opinions and demands, and make suggestions, to the people’s government (Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees in 1998).

Thus, as the institutional core of rural governance, the VC has to fulfil the following tasks: the management of public affairs, the construction of public goods, the provision of basic public welfare services and the maintenance of village order. In this study, I will use the performance of VCs in providing basic social welfare and constructing public goods to gauge the governing effectiveness of the VCs.

In this paper, I use two objective indicators to measure the governing performance of the VCs in terms of providing basic social welfare services and constructing public goods. These include the yearly expenditure on social welfare and the yearly expenditure on the construction of public goods. The detailed information of these two indicators comes from interviews with the village leaders in each surveyed village.

Table 1: Yearly Expenditures on Social Welfare and Public Goods

Expenditures in Social Welfare	Per cent	Expenditures in the Construction of Public Goods	Per cent
No spending	71	No spending	34
More than 1,000 CNY, but less than 10,000 CNY	22	More than 1,000 CNY, but less than 10,000 CNY	25
More than 10,000 CNY	7	More than 10,000 CNY	41

Source: Own compilation.

Based on the results from Table 1, I have deduced the following two findings:

1. Approximately 71 per cent of the surveyed villages did not spend any money on providing basic social welfare. And only approxima-

tely 7 per cent of the surveyed villages used more than 10,000 CNY yearly to provide basic social welfare for their villages.

2. Approximately 34 per cent of the surveyed villages did not spend any money on constructing public goods. Only approximately 40 per cent of the surveyed villages spent more than 10,000 CNY on constructing public goods every year.

I then rescale the values of these two indicators on expenditure to form an additive index – expenditure – to measure the effectiveness of governance – in terms of providing basic social welfare and constructing public goods – in each surveyed village.

Analysis

How are these two variables of local governance in the surveyed villages – the responsiveness of the VCs, and their expenditure on social welfare and public goods – related to each other? To answer this question, I ran a bi-variable correlation between responsiveness and expenditure. The result indicates that these two variables are highly correlated ($r = 0.654$). Given such a high degree of correlation between responsiveness and expenditure, I combine these two governance variables into a single Index of Governance Performance, which is constructed by aggregating the values of each of the two variables. Each of the two variables is standardized to have a range from 0 to 1, so that each has an equal weight in the index. The final score for the index is transformed to have a range from 0 to 1. The closer a score is to 1, the better a governance performance that a village has. The closer a score is to 0, the worse a governance performance that a village has.

Measurement of the Types of Social Capital along the Two Dimensions

In this study, as discussed above, I make a conceptual distinction between two types of social capital: generalized and particularized. Moreover, I operationalize each of these two types of social capital along two dimensions, subjective norms and objective networks. To obtain a collective profile of each type of social capital in each surveyed village community, I computed the village-average score for each of the questionnaire items (reported below) used to measure the level of each type of social capital along the two dimensions.

Subjective Norms

Social trust is the key ingredient of subjective norms of social capital. There is a fundamental and significant difference between particular (discriminative) trust and general (indiscriminative) trust. Particular trust refers to the faith in people who share the same background with you – for example, your own family, your friends and your groups (in other words, the people you know). General trust refers to the faith in people unlike your “own kind”. General trust is based on the belief that people different from yourself can nevertheless be part of your moral community.

I used the following question to measure different types of trust: “Generally speaking, if there are no direct economic concerns, would you please tell me how trustworthy are the following people: a. Residents of the same village with the same family name; b. Residents of the same village with different family names; c. Relatives; d. Outsiders that you do not know?”

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the structure of social trust among Chinese peasants is very hierarchical. The “radius of trust” first reaches their relatives; then the residents of the same village with the same family name; thirdly, the residents of the same village with different family names; and, lastly, outsiders. First, on the question of the trustworthiness of their relatives, 91 per cent of interviewed peasants reported that more than half of their relatives can be trusted. Second, on the question of the trustworthiness of the village residents with the same family name, 77 per cent of interviewees stated that more than half of this group of people are trustworthy. Third, for the question of the trustworthiness of the same village residents with different family names, 67 per cent of interviewed peasants reported that more than half of these residents can be trusted. Last, only 5.8 per cent of interviewed peasants reported that more than half of outside, unknown people can be trusted. Meanwhile, about 46 per cent of interviewed peasants reported that a majority of outsiders are not trustworthy.

Table 2: The Distribution of Different Types of Trust

	Generally speaking, if there are no direct economic concerns, would you please tell me how trustworthy are the following people?			
	a. Residents of the same village with the same family name	b. Residents of the same village with different family names	c. Relatives	d. Outsiders that you do not know
The majority can not be trusted	0.6	1.3	0.2	45.7
More than half cannot be trusted	3.8	6.0	1.0	28.1
Half can be trusted, but half cannot be trusted	18.5	26.0	7.4	20.5
More than a half can be trusted	44.3	41.8	34.3	4.5
The majority can be trusted	32.8	25.0	57.0	1.3

Source: Own compilation.

It is obvious that the trust in relatives and same village residents with the same family name can be considered familistic trust. Familistic trust originates from Confucian culture, in which family was the basic unit for individuals to survive and evade the tyranny of cruel rulers (Francis Fukuyama (1995 and 2001) has made such an argument. Of course, there are different views regarding this issue. For example, Norbert Elias and John Scott (1994) in their *The Established and the Outsiders* argue that, in all traditional societies, peasants tend to put more trust in strong ties within a small community.) And, family members had moral obligations to the whole family, and in return the family would protect all family members with regards to their interests. Such a familistic culture cultivated particular trust among family members. The results from our analysis of the survey questions lead to the conclusion that the particular (discriminative) trust is still extremely strong in rural China. Trust in outside, unknown people is not based on family or other bonding ties; hence, it is classifiable as typical general (indiscriminative) trust. However, this trust in outsiders is currently very weak in rural China. Such a finding is different from Ronald Inglehart's World Values survey and Jie Chen and

Chunlong Lu's survey, which indicate that social trust is abundantly present in Chinese society. The possible explanation is that Chen and Lu's survey is mainly focused on urban areas, and urban residents may actually feel a higher level of general trust than rural residents do (Chen and Lu 2007). On the other hand, the measurement in Ronald Inglehart's World Values survey does not distinguish between different types of trust (Inglehart 1997). As I have discussed above, particular trust may be abundant among rural residents, but general trust is still scarce in rural China.

One interesting point from these findings is that the trust in residents of the same village with different family names is moderately strong. This kind of social trust goes beyond the family ties and extends to other members of the same village community, although it does not extend to the general public outside of the VCs. Therefore, this kind of social trust can be considered the preliminary stage of general trust, which is particularly useful in a village community, since this trust will link all villagers together to commit collective actions to deal with any public issues that the villages may have.

Informal Social Networks

Empirical studies conducted in the developing world show that informal networks and organizations have played the same role as formal organizations in generating the trust and reciprocal feelings that lead to cooperative actions (Krishna 2002; Chen and Lu 2007). To measure objective networks of social capital in rural China, one will need to look at the large number of informal networks that exist in these areas. In this section, I will measure informal networks by differentiating two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. Bridging mainly consists of a set of inclusive social networks that connect people from different backgrounds. Before the 1978 reform, peasants were tied to their villages due to the strict household registration system, and most rural residents were equally poor. With the implementation of reform policies, though, more and more peasants have enjoyed the freedom to migrate from one area to another, and the income gap between villagers has gradually increased. Villagers are now confronted with neighbours and friends with different socio-economic backgrounds and positions. Since objective networks of bridging social capital connect people from different social, economic and even political backgrounds, the peasants' relationships with other inhabitants of their villages have become an important indicator for the

measurement of these kinds of inclusive networks. I used the following two questions to measure inclusive networks in villages:

“1. How close is your relationship with other peasants in your village?”

2. Do you have cooperative activities with other peasants in your village to deal with daily demands?”

For Question 1, respondents were asked to answer this question on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating “not close at all”; 2 indicating “not very close”; 3 indicating “so-so”; 4 indicating “close”; and 5 indicating “very close”. For Question 2, five alternatives were posted: “not at all”, scored 1; “very little”, scored 2; “sometimes”, scored 3; “often”, scored 4; and “very often”, scored 5. The values of these two questions were combined to form an additive index to capture respondents’ participation in inclusive social networks.

Table 3: Participation in Inclusive Networks

	How close is your relationship with other peasants in your village?
not close at all	0.8
not very close	2.1
so-so	10.6
close	41.6
very close	44.9
	Do you have cooperative activities with other peasants in your village to deal with daily demands?
not at all	4.0
very little	12.8
sometimes	29.2
often	37.9
very often	16.1

Source: Own compilation.

The results of these two survey questions are presented in Table 3, below. They indicate that inclusive social networks in rural China are abundant. For Question 1, the majority of respondents (86.5 per cent) regard their relationship with other peasants in their villages as “close” or “very

close”. Only 2.9 per cent of respondents stated that their relationship with other peasants in their villages is “not very close” or “not close at all”.

As for the second question, 83.2 per cent of respondents state that they do have cooperative activities with other peasants in their villages to deal with daily demands. Only 16.8 per cent of respondents said that they have “very little” or no cooperative activities with other peasants in their villages to deal with daily demands.

Bonding social capital includes a set of exclusive social networks, which connect people by their shared economic, political or demographic identity – such as class, occupation, ethnicity, lineage or religion. Such networks, therefore, tend to exclude people who do not share the common identity (Fukuyama 1995 and 2001). In Confucian culture, the family name is one of the most important identities for individuals. In rural areas, in particular, people were assembled into clan organizations along the lines of their family names in order to deal with the daily needs that were essential for individuals to survive. Strangers were excluded from such family networks and were considered not to be trustworthy. Such familial networks were well organized, and villages in many areas built their own temples where they worshipped their ancestors together and made important decisions for their family. Therefore, the clan organization is one of the most important forms of bonding social capital in rural areas so as to organize peasants for collective actions – such as irrigation projects or planting and harvesting crops. Therefore, in order to measure exclusive networks, I used the following question: “In your village, is there any clan organization?”

Respondents were asked to answer this question on a 3-point scale, with 1 indicating “no”, 2 indicating “yes, there is a familial network that shares the same family name, but there is no organization”, and 3 indicating “yes, there is clan organization that has a clan temple”. As Table 4 below indicates, only 1.9 per cent of respondents agreed that there is a clan organization in their village. Such a result shows that exclusive social networks have greatly reduced since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The organizations of rural China have changed significantly since then – the people’s commune replaced the traditional Chinese grassroots organizations in rural areas, which were previously founded around familistic networks.

Table 4: Participation in Exclusive Networks

	In your village, is there any clan organization?	
	Frequency	Per cent
No	3,997	93.5
Yes, there is familial network that shares the same family name, but there is no organization	197	4.6
Yes, there is a clan organization that has a clan temple	80	1.9
Total	4,274	100.0

Source: Own compilation.

Village-Level Stock of Social Capital

In this study, I treat social capital as being the attributes of communities. I measure the stock of different types and dimensions of social capital in each village based on the responses of individual villagers to the survey questions.

First, to measure participation in inclusive networks, I aggregate the responses of all individuals interviewed in each surveyed village. For the relationship with other peasants, average villager responses vary from a high of 5.0 – which means that the relationships among peasants in that surveyed village are extremely intimate – to a low of 1.0 – which means that the relationships among peasants in that village are “unfamiliar”. For the cooperative activities with other peasants, average villager responses vary from a high of 5.0 – which means that the cooperative activities among peasants in that surveyed village are numerous – to a low of 1.0 – which means that such activities in that village are scarce. These two items are combined to form an additive index for participation in inclusive networks in each surveyed village and I will use it in the multivariate analysis that follows.

Second, for the exclusive networks, a village will be counted as having a clan organization if there is one respondent who has identified that this village has the clan organization. As a result, out of 410 surveyed villages, 114 villages were identified as having a clan organization. Of these 114 villages, 35 have a clan temple, which means that these 35 villages can be said to have a well-organized clan.

Third, in terms of the subjective norms, I consider trust in relatives and in residents of the same village with the same family name as typical of particular trust. Therefore, the responses given by interviewees to these two questions are aggregated in order to measure the intensity of particular trust in each surveyed village. For trust in relatives, average villager responses varied from a high of 5.0 – which means that particular trust in relatives is extremely strong in the surveyed village – to a low of 3.3 – which means that particular trust in relatives is moderate in the surveyed village. For trust in residents of the same village with the same family name, average villager responses varied from a high of 5.0 – which means that particular trust in residents of the same village with the same family name is extremely strong in the surveyed village – to a low of 2.1 – which means that particular trust in residents of the same village with the same family name is fairly weak in the surveyed village. These two items are combined to form an additive index for particular trust in each surveyed village, which will be used in the multivariate analysis that follows.

Last, trust in the outside people that you do not know is regarded as typical of general trust. To measure the intensity of general trust in each surveyed village, the responses to this question are aggregated for all individuals interviewed in these villages. For this question, average villager responses vary from a high of 4.5 – which means that general trust in that surveyed village is strong – to a low of 1.0 – which means that general trust is scarce in that village.

Based on the above findings, in the following section I summarize some major points. First, it is obvious that the stock of bonding social capital is still abundant in rural China, even though the Communist Party tried to replace the old and traditional family networks with new communist organizations (that is, the people's communes). With the initiation of the post-Mao reforms and the collapse of the people's communes, the re-emergence of familial ties has become a common phenomenon in rural areas. As these findings indicate, out of 410 surveyed villages, 114 have clan organizations. In other words, about 27 per cent of the surveyed villages have some kind of clan organization. Moreover, about 8 per cent of the surveyed villages have advanced clan organizations, which own the common ancestral temples. On the other hand, in terms of subjective norms, the majority of the surveyed villages have high stocks of particular trust, which is measured in this study by indicators of the belief in the trustworthiness of relatives and residents of the

same village with the same family name. More than 70 per cent of the surveyed villages have average scores that are higher than 4.0, which means that particular trust is extremely strong in surveyed villages.

Second, the modern, bridging social capital is in formation in rural China, even though the stock of bridging social capital is still moderate. With the deepening of the post-Mao reforms and the ongoing process of marketization, general trust and inclusive social networks that connect people with different backgrounds have emerged in rural areas. In this study, inclusive networks are measured by the relationship with other peasants as well as by the cooperative activities in villages. With regard to the relationship with other peasants, more than 50 per cent of the surveyed villages have average scores of less than 2.0, which means that in more than 50 per cent of the surveyed villages the relationship between villagers is “unfamiliar”. With regard to the cooperative activities in villages, the average score of more than 60 per cent of the surveyed villages is less than 2.0, which means that the cooperative activities among peasants are scarce in those villages. On the other hand, the majority of the surveyed villages have low stocks of general trust. The average score of more than 70 per cent of the surveyed villages is less than 2.0, which indicates the scarcity of general trust in outside people that they do not know.

Impacts of Two Types of Social Capitals along the Two Dimensions

In this study, I expect that the types of social capital defined and operationalized above have different impacts on the performance of the VCs in rural China, which is measured by the peasants’ evaluations of the VC’s responsiveness and effectiveness in each village. The explanations for this general expectation can be derived from earlier studies of social capital and from our own field observations.

Impacts of Bridging Social Capital

I expect that the two dimensions of bridging social capital – general trust in the outside people that you do not know and participation in inclusive networks – have a positive impact on the governance performance of the grassroots self-government institutions in rural China. There are two major reasons for this expectation. First, both general trust and inclusive

networks of bridging social capital encourage individuals to compromise and cooperate across social, economic and ethnic divides (Fukuyama 1995 and 2002; Knack 2002). As Eric Uslaner points out, general social trust “can lead us to civic engagement with people who are different from ourselves” (Uslaner 2002: 249). As a result, this kind of generalized cooperative spirit creates a desirable environment for a representative government to function responsively and effectively in. Therefore, bridging social capital may have a direct and positive impact on the performance of representative government. As Stephen Knack contends, bridging social capital “can broaden governmental accountability, so government must be responsive to citizens at large rather than to narrow interests” (Knack 2002: 773).

Second, my field observations suggest that bridging social capital generates a positive impact on the governance performance of the VCs in rural areas. Bridging social capital helps the VCs tackle social changes brought about by the increasing diversity of the rural population since the post-Mao rural reforms. These reforms ended the people’s commune system and distributed all collective land to individual households who then had to be responsible for their own production. Meanwhile, rural households were now allowed to participate in non-farming economic activities such as opening small businesses or working in factories. All in all, due to these reform policies, rural communities have become increasingly diverse in terms of their economic status. The gap between rich and poor among individual householders has become conspicuous. In addition, since the reform, peasants have no longer been tied to their villages. They now have increasing freedom to migrate from village to village and from rural areas to urban areas. In some villages, the majority of adult males have migrated to urban areas and the elderly, females and children have been left behind. As a result, villages have become much more diverse since 1978 (Kennedy 2002) than they were during the Mao era. Before the rural reforms, villagers were tied to collective land and lived in their villages for their whole lives due to the lack of opportunity for social mobility. Therefore, in order to perform well and to satisfy such a diverse and ever-changing village population, the VCs need to respond to the broad interests of their villagers. Because bridging social capital nurtures a government’s responsiveness to the interests of most citizens rather than to the narrow interests of a small group of people, a higher stock of bridging social capital in a village is likely to facilitate a better governance performance by the VC.

On the other hand, since the tax-for-fee reform, the VCs have had to rely upon the case-by-case system to fund requests from villagers for support for basic social welfare and for the construction of public goods. A generalized cooperative spirit among villagers is crucially important for the effective functioning of the case-by-case system. Without such a cooperative spirit, the compromise and consensus would become more difficult to achieve among the increasingly diverse rural population. Clearly, an abundant stock of bridging social capital is conducive to the success of the case-by-case system.

Impacts of Bonding Social Capital

I expect that the two dimensions of bonding social capital – particular trust and participation in exclusive networks – may have negative impacts on the governance performance of grassroots self-government institutions in rural China. First of all, some early studies have cogently argued that both particular trust and exclusive networks of bonding social capital tend to encourage governments and their officials to take care of the narrow interests of one group or another (Fukuyama 1995 and 2002; Knack 2002; Zmerli 2003). This tendency could jeopardize the responsiveness of a local government to its broader constituency in a community. In addition, this kind of social capital might not promote trust and cooperation among groups or individuals who have diverse backgrounds, because both particular trust and exclusive networks tend to emphasize the divisions and distinctions between “us” (those whom we know and who are like us) and “them” (those whom we do not know and who are not like us). Bonding social capital might generate distrust and suspicion towards people who are considered to be excluded from a group and also encourage people to take a free ride on the backs of others. As Stephen Knack and Eric Uslaner suggest, bonding social capital, especially particular trust, is likely to discourage individuals from engaging in collective actions on behalf of the interests of their communities (Knack 2002; Uslaner 2002).

Second, as mentioned before, one of the direct outcomes of the post-Mao rural reforms is that rural communities have become increasingly diverse. Such increasing diversity requires the VCs to represent a myriad of villagers’ interests. Meanwhile, the willingness to cooperate with other villagers has become more and more important as a prerequisite for the effective governance of VCs in increasingly diverse rural communities.

However, bonding social capital has the tendency to “bolster our narrower selves” rather than to encourage a broad representation of, and cooperation among, people who do not know each other and who are not alike. This kind of social capital will make village politics more divisive and polarized. Therefore, it will be more difficult to achieve agreement and consensus on adopting or implementing any public policies.

Multivariate Analysis

To test the expected impacts of these two types of social capital along their two dimensions on VCs’ performance, while controlling for the potential influence of other variables, I run a multiple regression model (OLS). Overall, the results from this regression model support my earlier expectations regarding the relationships between the two types of social capital and the VCs’ performance (Table 5).

First of all, the evidence presented in Table 5 clearly indicates that both subjective norms and objective networks of bridging social capital – general trust and participation in inclusive social networks – have a significant and positive impact on the governance performance even after controlling for the influences of regional location, distance to market town, village size and level of village economic development. In other words, as expected, those villages that are endowed with abundant bridging social capital tend to experience good governance by the VCs in terms of the four governance dimensions: the responsiveness of the VCs, the management of land distribution, taxation, and the expenditure of social welfare and public goods.

Second, the results from the regression model show that both subjective norms and objective networks of bonding social capital – particular trust (the trust in relatives and residents of the same village with the same family name) and participation in exclusive networks (the clan organizations) – have a significant negative impact on the governance performance. These results suggest that those villages whose particular trust and exclusive social networks are rampant tend to suffer from the poor governance performance of the VCs in terms of the four governance dimensions. Finally, among these control variables, only the level of village economic development has a significant impact on the governance performance. Those villages with high levels of economic development tend to have more effective and more responsive VCs.

Table 5: Multiple Regression (OLS) of Social Capital and Governance Performance

	Index of Governance Performance		
	<i>B</i>	s.e.	beta
Bridging Social Capital:			
Participation in Inclusive Networks	2.43**	0.98	0.25
General Trust	0.648**	0.21	0.16
Bonding Social Capital:			
Participation in Exclusive Networks	-2.12**	0.95	-0.17
Particular Trust	-0.83**	0.31	-0.16
Control Variables:			
Village Economic Development ¹	0.83**	0.31	0.19
Village Size	0.70	0.61	0.06
Distance to Market Town	1.73	1.42	0.03
Regional Location: ²			
Northeast	1.52	1.34	0.05
North	2.01	2.01	0.06
Middle	2.37	1.86	0.03
South	0.89	0.72	0.02
Constant	1.12**	0.42	
R ²		0.34	
Adjusted R ²		0.32	
N		382	

Notes: *B* refers to un-standardized coefficient, whereas beta stands for standardized coefficient. s.e. = standardized error. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

¹ Village Economic Development is measured by the average household income.

² Northwest is used as the baseline comparison.

Source: Own compilation.

I will now comment on the differences between my findings and those of Lily Tsai (2002 and 2007). First, my research has a different dependent variable, which combines both the responsiveness and effectiveness of the VCs in the provision of public goods; Tsai's (2002 and 2007) research focused more narrowly upon the provision of several types of public goods. Second, Tsai's (2002 and 2007) independent variable is different and mainly measures the existence of solitary groups. Thus, Tsai's (2002 and 2007) research attempted to understand how the exist-

tence of solitary groups in a village had an impact upon the provision public goods. She emphasized that in situations where the solitary groups have the characteristic of “encompassing” as well as the characteristic of “embedding” (Tsai 2007), such solitary groups might have a positive impact upon the provision of public goods. According to Tsai, encompassment refers to the geographic fit between a solitary group and a local government’s jurisdiction, while embeddedness denotes the extent to which a solitary group “incorporate[s] local officials into the group as members” (Tsai 2007: 356).

My research has portrayed an overall picture of the impacts of two types of social capital upon village governance, and my research has found that both subjective norms and objective networks of bonding social capital – particular trust (the trust in relatives and residents of the same village with the same family name) and participation in exclusive networks (the clan organizations) – have a significant negative impact on the governance performance, especially in terms of the responsiveness of the VCs. Such findings echo some recent empirical case studies (for example, Wen and Jiang 2004; Xiao 2010): The village election has been dominated by clan organizations where the strength of clan organizations was very pronounced; moreover, in these localities the elected VCs tended to respond only to important clan members. In sum, while my intention was not to deny the positive impacts that clan organizations can have upon the provision of public goods, as proposed by Tsai (2007), my research nevertheless indicates that particular trust and participation in exclusive networks have had negative impacts upon the responsiveness of the VCs across a wide range of locations.

Conclusion

It has been established that there is a theoretical and conceptual distinction between the two types of social capital – bridging and bonding – along its two dimensions (in other words, subjective norms and objective networks). I have further argued that the two types of social capital along the two dimensions variably influence the performance of grassroots self-government institutions in rural China. In general, this argument has been supported by empirical evidence obtained from the survey of 410 village communities throughout the whole of China. That is, the bridging social capital embodied in general trust and inclusive social networks positively affected the VCs’ performance, as measured by their respon-

siveness to the interests of residents at large and their effectiveness in conducting public affairs. The bonding social capital as manifested in particular trust and exclusive social networks negatively impacted such performances.

These findings may have at least two important implications: one is theoretical, the other political. Theoretically, the findings support the argument made by some earlier studies (for example, Knack 2002; Fukuyama 2002; Uslaner 2002; Callahan 2005) that social capital is a multifaceted concept, and that various types and dimensions of social capital may have different – rather than only positive – impacts on socio-economic development and governance performance. As Knack (2002: 783) has shown, “social capital is a heterogeneous concept, and its various dimensions do not all necessarily affect government performance or other outcomes in the same way”. Furthermore, in this study I have explored a more comprehensive conceptual framework in which to operationalize social capital, which distinguishes two types of social capital along the two dimensions (in other words, subjective norms and objective networks). The empirical findings (that the two types of social capital along the two dimensions variably influence the performance of rural self-government institutions in China) have confirmed that this comprehensive conceptual framework is useful for the detection of different kinds of impacts by the various types of social capital.

Politically, the findings of this study suggest that under a transitional political system, such as the one in China, the performance of grassroots self-government institutions in rural areas may be significantly improved by increasing the right kind of social capital along the two dimensions. In the case of rural China, it is bridging social capital that can best contribute to the successful performance of grassroots self-government institutions.

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Appendix: Survey and Sample

The data used in this study came from a nationwide public opinion survey that was conducted at the end of 2005. The design of the questionnaire and the sample – and the implementation of the actual survey – were undertaken by the Department of Sociology at Renmin University of China. The survey was based on a probability sample of 410 rural villages in China. This probability sample was derived from a multi-stage sampling strategy. At the first stage of sampling, all county-level units (县, *xian*) in China were listed, from among which 76 were randomly chosen. These 76 *xian* were located in 24 provinces and municipalities directly under the control of the central government (see Table 6). At the second stage of sampling, 205 townships (乡, *xiang*) were randomly selected from these 76 *xian* by using the technique of probability proportionate to size (PPS), with the big county unit yielding 4 townships, and the small county unit yielding 1 township. At the third stage, two villages were randomly chosen from each township, yielding a total of 410 villages. Table 6 indicates the distribution of the sampled villages in 24 provinces and municipalities directly under the control of the central government.

A two-step interview was implemented in the 410 sampled villages. First, 4,274 households were randomly chosen from 410 villages, with each village yielding 10 or 11 households. Then, one individual was randomly chosen from each of the 4,274 households as the interviewee. These 4,274 interviewees were asked questions about such things as trust, formal and informal socializing, political participation, the governance of the villagers' committees, agricultural production, taxation burdens, volunteering and democratic values. Second, village leaders (that is, directors of the villagers' committees and party secretaries of the village branches) were chosen from each of the 410 sample villages. These village leaders were asked about such issues as village contextual facts, economic development, village budget, public goods provision and their self-evaluation. After this two-step interview, two separate databases were generated: One was based on individual villagers' responses; the other one was based on village leaders' responses.

College students from the Department of Sociology at Renmin University of China were employed as field interviewers; they had been trained by the project members in field-interviewing techniques before the actual survey was carried out. Respondents were offered confidentiality terms and were encouraged to provide answers that best captured their true feelings. In general, the evidence from other surveys (for example, Chen 2004; Shi 1997) suggests that Chinese residents feel freer than is expected in the West to express their views in public opinion surveys like ours.

Table 6: The Distribution of Sampled Villages

	Number of Villages	Per cent of Villages
Hebei	22	5.4
Shanxi	8	2.0
Inner Mongolia	8	2.0
Liaoning	18	4.4
Jilin	4	1.0
Heilongjiang	6	1.5
Jiangsu	30	7.3
Zhejiang	18	4.4
Anhui	24	5.9
Fujian	12	2.9
Jiangxi	12	2.9
Shandong	32	7.8
Henan	36	8.8
Hubei	24	5.9
Hunan	20	4.9
Guangdong	20	4.9
Guangxi	16	3.9
Hainan	2	0.5
Chongqing	4	1.0
Sichuan	38	9.3
Guizhou	18	4.4
Yunnan	16	3.9
Shanxi	12	2.9
Gansu	10	2.4
Total	410	100.0

Source: Own compilation.

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