

# Political Trust in East and Southeast Asia: The Joint Effects of Education, Corruption Perception, and Urbanization

Anli Jiang <sup>1,2</sup> and Tony Huiquan Zhang <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Governance Studies, Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai, 519087, China <sup>2</sup>School of Government, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100875, China <sup>3</sup>Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

## Abstract

This article examines how education, corruption perception, and urbanization jointly influence political trust in Asia. Previous literature proposes a “performance-based evaluation” thesis whereby corruption perception is associated with political trust. We hypothesized this association could be moderated by individual educational attainment and socioeconomic statuses. Applying multilevel models to the Asian Barometer Survey (2001–2016) data, we found interaction effects of education, the urban–rural divide, and corruption perceptions in shaping political trust in 14 East and Southeast Asia societies. For rural Asians, education does not affect political trust when they perceive low corruption; it leads to lower trust when they perceive high corruption. For urban Asians, such an interaction does not exist, and education monotonically erodes political trust no matter how they perceive the severity of corruption.

Political trust is an important theme for modern social scientists (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008), as it serves as the bridge between citizens and governments. If citizens have confidence in their government, they will actively participate in public affairs and contribute to good governance (Levi & Stoker, 2000). On the contrary, political distrust generates hostility between the state and the people, causing social order decay (Fukuyama, 2014; Putnam, 2000). Therefore, finding out why governments are trusted becomes a critical task. Classical public opinion research has proposed two arguments: governments with high legitimacy and good performance will be trusted, and modern citizens will become more critical of governments, the “performance evaluation” thesis

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tony Huiquan Zhang, PhD, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau, Avenida da Universidade, Taipa, Macau SAR, China. E-mail: huiquanzhang@um.edu.mo

and the “critical citizen” thesis, respectively (Caillier, 2010; Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Norris, 1999; Zhang, Sun, & Cao, 2020).

However, recent work has generated mixed findings for both theses. In terms of the “performance evaluation” thesis, scholars have noticed a paradox: accountable governments in democracies with competitive elections often receive harsh feedback, while authoritarian governments without procedural legitimacy are well supported (Li, 2016; Nathan, 2017). Countering the “critical citizen” thesis, some scholars find well-educated, upper-class, urban residents are not becoming “critical”; instead, those with high socioeconomic status (SES) are often satisfied with their governments and status quo (Catterberg & Moreno 2006; Zhang, Brym, & Andersen, 2017).

Both the “performance evaluation” and the “critical citizen” theses require qualification. We argue both are conditional; individuals’ political trust is contingent on the combined effects of how the government performs, how individuals perceive it, and where individuals are situated in society. Given these likely intersections, we propose to explore how education, location of residence, and perception of governments jointly influence political trust. In this article, we turn to East and Southeast Asia, where societies have high heterogeneity in their levels of economic development, cultural and religious backgrounds, and political systems. Evidence from such a context may help us reflect on how different individuals form their confidence in governments in diverse contexts.

We used the four waves of Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) data (2001–2016) for 14 East and Southeast Asian societies. Our multilevel models revealed the following. First, education and urban residence are associated with less trust in governments, supporting the “critical citizen” thesis. Second, if respondents view corruption as severe in their country, they tend to distrust the government, supporting the “performance-based trust” thesis. Third, education and corruption perception interact with each other: when respondents perceive corruption as severe and have more education, they express more political distrust. More interestingly, the interaction between education and perceived corruption varies for urban and rural residents. For urban Asians, education and perceived corruption only show main effects and no interactions. For rural Asians, the educational effects diverge at different levels of corruption perceptions: well-educated rural Asians are even more dissatisfied than the less-educated if they perceive high corruption.

This study contributes to the literature in the following ways. First, it confirms the validity of the performance evaluation thesis and the critical citizen thesis with fresh evidence from the Asian context. In Asia, we find that political performance is considered a moral issue (Inoguchi, 2017; Scott, 2008). Corruption perception plays an important role in affecting political trust itself and its determinants. Second, it reveals the complex roles of education and the perception of corruption and points to an urban–rural gap. Third, the findings speak to the “middle-income trap” and “democracy deconsolidation” themes in the modernization and democratization literature. When developing countries experience an ongoing urbanization process, higher education expands throughout society, and corruption intensifies, people may lose trust in their governments, and this, in turn, may threaten social stability.

## Education, Urbanization, and Political Trust: Critical Citizen Thesis

Political trust is a central concern of social scientists, as it has important implications for a good society (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). Conventional

wisdom says political trust is conducive to active political participation, economic and governmental performance, and reduced corruption (Inglehart, 2018). It can stimulate a well-organized government, underpinning state legitimacy (Hetherington & Husser, 2012). If they have high political trust, citizens will collaborate with governments, participate in political processes, and work together to build a robust civil society (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003). The flip side, political distrust, has deleterious consequences, including low voting turnout, reluctance to participate civically, political inertia, social unrest, and populism (Caillier, 2010; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Given the importance of political trust, scholars are naturally interested in identifying its determinants. Variables related to trust in governments and political institutions generally include age, gender, religious affiliation, and so on (Criado & Herreros, 2007; Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016). One of the individual-level predictors, education, is particularly interesting. Educational effects on political trust have been mixed. Scholars find educational effects vary across democratic and nondemocratic societies (Yang & Tang, 2010; Zhang, 2020). One set of studies finds education enhances political trust, as educated individuals are often enjoying higher social statuses and more access to the political institutions and resources (Criado & Herreros, 2007; Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016).

Following the critical citizen thesis (Norris, 1999), another set finds more education is associated with cognitive sophistication, critical thinking, and higher expectation of government accountability and performance (Kim, 2010; Norris, 1999). More recent studies on education and political trust argue that the inconsistency indicates that educational effects are dependent on the social context (Ugur-Cinar, Cinar, & Kose, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Specifically, in today's media environment, higher educational attainment usually means the capability of reading in-depth news, evaluating government performance, and questioning the legitimacy of politicians and regimes, which may erode political trust. Therefore, we argue the following:

*H1: People who receive more education will trust the government less than those who receive less education.*

A second aspect of the critical citizen thesis is SES would affect one's political attitudes. Individuals' situations in society, such as income, class, occupation, and political status, are understood to deeply influence views on a wide range of social issues (Wals & Rudolph, 2019; Zhang, 2020). One important aspect of one's SES that affects public opinion is the urban-rural gap. From classical theorists such as Durkheim (2014) and Simmel (2012) to modern theorists such as Samuel Huntington (2006) and Charles Tilly (1967), scholars have documented the urban-rural divide and its important implications for the economy, politics, lifestyles, and public opinions. The urban-rural gap has widened with the new millennium as globalization, marketization, and rapid technological and economic development have afforded incredible opportunities to urbanites and fueled the modernization process (Huntington, 2006). The substantial gaps favoring urban over rural areas in many aspects, including infrastructure, education, income, safety, and wellbeing, are expected to generate a more progressive lifestyle and a more open-minded disposition among urban residents than rural residents.

Such an urban/rural divide could generate a critical citizen mindset, mainly among urbanites (Norris, 1999). Urban residents may experience more rapid cultural change, exposure to diverse lifestyles, and expansion of higher education. In the long run, then, urbanization may cultivate a more critical public. Rural residents may expect fewer

public goods and services from governments (Han, 2012) and may be more conservative and traditional in their political orientations. Among rural Asians, value preferences are largely determined by Confucianism and other traditional or religious views teaching the value of loyalty and obedience to authorities. Such ideas are disappearing or less salient among urbanized Asians exposed to Western ideologies (Inoguchi, 2017; Li, 2008). Besides, in the past decades of economic growth and social changes in East and Southeast Asian societies, millions of rural residents preferring an urban lifestyle have migrated to urban areas, driving urbanization and gentrification. Such a self-selection process may further distinguish rural from urban residents in the Asian context. Given the above discussion, we formulate our second hypothesis as the following:

*H<sub>2</sub>: People residing in urban areas will trust the government less than those residing in rural areas.*

### **Corruption Perception and Political Trust: Performance-Evaluation Thesis**

According to the performance-evaluation thesis, political trust is affected by how citizens view the government's performance in promoting the economy, providing public goods, and retaining an integrated group of civil servants (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Wang, 2005). Positive images of these governmental roles would generate political trust. Negative associations with governments, such as incompetence, misconduct, and police brutality, may lead to political distrust and even social unrest (Xu & Jiang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). An especially important aspect of political trust and distrust is whether the government and its officials are corrupted and how people perceive the severity and prevalence of corruption (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006).

Previous work has consistently demonstrated that corruption erodes the legitimacy of authority and creates public distrust of the governments of democratic and nondemocratic societies alike (Chang & Chu, 2006; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). Not only the actual corruption, but perceived corruption is an important factor in people's overall assessment of government performance (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003). Perceptions of corruption among governing officials may even lead to disillusionment with central democratic principles, such as fairness and transparency, and undermine authority's legitimacy (Morris & Klesner, 2010). This leads us to hypothesize the following:

*H<sub>3</sub>: People who perceive corruption as prevalent will trust the government less than those who do not.*

We have argued that education, residence location, and perception of corruption are possible determinants of political trust. Current findings on these variables are inconsistent (Schoon & Cheng, 2011), which we speculate may come from the macro-micro interactions; in other words, the effects vary across social contexts. For example, recent research contextualizing education's impact has shed useful light on the interaction of education and perceived corruption (Chang & Chu, 2006; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Schoon & Cheng, 2011). An increase in years of education leads to a high level of support for modern and democratic norms and proclivities by fostering liberal values (Dalton, 1994). Research also finds the better educated are more likely to support democratic values and principles than the less educated (Zhang, 2020).

However, this also means they would be more actively involved in political participation and have a higher expectation of the government (Galston 2001; Norris 1999). Their increased support is not unilateral: well-educated people base their evaluations of the ruling government's performance on more accurate and complete information than their less-educated counterparts simply because of their better ability to acquire and process the relevant information (Ugur-Cinar et al., 2020). Therefore, education not only helps citizens acquire the democratic values and principles they need to oppose corruption; it also enhances their political cognition and political knowledge, thus affecting their evaluation of government performance (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). To summarize, the well-educated individuals are generally more politically involved and more politically aware than the less-educated individuals. They are more aware of government misconduct, such as corruption, and express more distrust. This leads to the next hypothesis:

*H4: Compared to the less-educated, well-educated individuals' trust in government will be more susceptible to their perception of corruption prevalence.*

In the lead-up to H4, we proposed an interaction between education and corruption perception in shaping political trust. We further believe this "education-perception of corruption" link will work differently for urban and rural Asians. First, although rural residents are often more loyal to political authorities and obey them more readily (e.g., governments, religious leaders) than urban residents, their loyalty is often emotionally and morally charged (Scott, 2008). In other words, rural residents may be more loyal than their urban counterparts when they see their governments as trustworthy; by the same token, they may be more frustrated when they see their governments as corrupt.

Second, education means much more in rural areas than urban ones in Asia, simply because of its relative scarcity. Education, especially higher education, is increasingly accessible for those in urban Asia, but those in rural Asia are not so fortunate. Considering the law of diminishing marginal utility, each additional year of education should generate more differences for rural than urban Asians in their relative social status, income, class, wellbeing, and political attitudes. Thus, we expect educated rural elites in Asia are more likely to become community leaders or political activists. They are morally obliged to be vocal and active when they see social injustice. In urban areas, there are many more people with education; they do not stand out from the crowd, and their fellow citizens do not expect them to lead. At the same time, rural educated elites are more likely to be exposed to the local political process and governance. Furthermore, if corruption is an issue in their local community, they are more likely to know about it than their less-educated neighbors.

Therefore, we expect well-educated rural individuals will be more sensitive to the government's ethical performance than less-educated rural or urban individuals. We specifically expect that in urban areas, education and perception of corruption will only show main effects; in other words, they will independently lead to erosion of political trust. However, in rural areas, such a link will be strong; educated rural elites will be more loyal to the regime when they perceive low corruption, but they will be more critical when they perceive high corruption. Hence, we formulate the following set of hypotheses:

*H5: The interaction effect between education and corruption perceptions will be more salient in rural than in urban Asia.*

*H5a: In rural Asia, educational effects and perception of corruption effects will enhance each other. Well-educated individuals will trust the government even more than the less-educated when they see low corruption; they will distrust the government even more than the less-educated when they see high corruption.*

*H5b: In urban Asia, educational effects and perception of corruption effects will not interact.*

## Data and Method

The data used for this study came from the ABS, an international survey in East and Southeast Asia. The ABS project has conducted four survey waves (2001–2003, 2005–2008, 2010–2012, and 2014–2016) in the following Asian societies: Cambodia, China (the mainland), Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan (ROC), Thailand, and Vietnam. Since not all 14 societies were surveyed in all four waves, there are 48 “country/region by survey year” (hereafter country-year) observations at the aggregate level. In each society, the ABS project collects data from a representative sample. The number of observations in each country-year case ranges from 1,000 (in smaller countries such as Cambodia) to around 4,000 (in more populous societies such as Mainland China). At the individual level, the ABS project collects not only demographic and SES information but also information on people’s opinions, attitudes, and value orientations. The descriptive information available in the ABS data is shown in [Table 1](#). As [Table 1](#) indicates, the four waves cover a wide range of societies and diverse populations. Furthermore, the ABS project provides high-quality data with a low missing rate.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the ABS data suited our research goal of comparatively investigating the effects of education, corruption perception, urbanization, and political trust across Asia.

The outcome variable in this study was people’s trust in the central government. Four responses to a question about trust are available to survey respondents. We coded the answers on a scale from 1 to 4: “do not trust at all” = 1; “somewhat distrust” = 2; “somewhat trust” = 3; “trust a lot” = 4. For the focal predictor, we used urban/rural residence as a dummy variable; rural residents were the reference group and coded as 0; urban residents were coded as 1. Education was measured in years, ranging from 0 to 20. Corruption perception was based on the responses to two questions: “How many officials in the national government are corrupted?” and “How many officials in the local government are corrupted?” Like in the question about trust in government, each of these questions has four responses. We coded answers as the following: “almost none” = 0; “some” = 1; “the majority are corrupt” = 2; “almost everyone is corrupt” = 3. Cronbach’s alpha for the two items showed reliability to form one factor (alpha = 0.72). We summed the two responses and ended up with a scale of perceived corruption from 0 to 6, where higher numbers mean respondents see corruption as a prevailing problem in their country.

<sup>1</sup>The missing rates are low for most variables. There are no missing cases for survey information such as country, wave, survey year, and personal weights. For key demographic variables, such as gender, age, education, religious denominations, and location of residence, the missing rates are lower than 2%. The missing rates for marital status, household size, subjective social class, and trust in governments are around 5%. For remaining missing information at the individual level, we imputed datasets with the expectation-maximization method (N = 5).

Table 1.  
*Descriptive Statistics at the Individual Level*

	Overall
No. of obs.	72,118
Independent variables	
Wave (%)	
ABS1	12,217 (16.94%)
ABS2	19,798 (27.45%)
ABS3	19,436 (26.95%)
ABS4	20,667 (28.66%)
Region (%)	
Japan	5,446 (7.55%)
HKSAR.	4,084 (5.66%)
Korea	5,119 (7.10%)
Mainland China	15,822 (21.94%)
Mongolia	4,793 (6.65%)
Philippines	4,800 (6.66%)
Taiwan	6,251 (8.67%)
Thailand	5,804 (8.05%)
Indonesia	4,608 (6.51%)
Singapore	3,051 (4.23%)
Vietnam	3,591 (4.98%)
Cambodia	3,400 (4.71%)
Malaysia	3,639 (5.05%)
Myanmar	1,620 (2.25%)
Male = 1 (%)	35,501 (49.3%)
Age (mean [SD])	44.68 (15.66)
Religion	
None	26,042 (36.11%)
Buddhist	22,613 (31.36%)
Christian	9,266 (12.85%)
Islamic	7,364 (10.21%)
Other	6,833 (9.47%)
Household size (mean [SD])	4.21 (2.03)
Income level (%)	
1st lowest quintile	14,221 (23.79%)
2nd quintile	15,371 (25.71%)
3rd quintile	12,765 (21.35%)
4th quintile	8,786 (14.70%)
5th top (richest) quintile	8,645 (14.46%)
Years of education (mean [SD])	9.35 (4.59)
Urban = 1 (%)	40,459 (56.15%)
Perception of corruption (0–6, mean [SD])	2.82 (1.44)
Dependent variables	
Political trust (1–4, mean [SD])	2.79 (0.90)

At the individual level, we included the following covariates: gender, age, religious affiliation, household size, and self-reported income level. Our focal variable was educational attainment. Gender was a dummy variable (female = 0, male = 1). Age was a

continuous variable measured in years starting at 18. Religious affiliations were categorical variables converted into dummies: none (reference group); Christian; Buddhism; Islam; and other beliefs. We controlled for family size and self-reported income levels: the lowest, second, third, fourth, and top (richest) quintiles. We used the lowest as the reference category and converted the remaining four groups into dummy variables.

Macro social contexts can shape individuals' attitudes and opinions. Therefore, we controlled for some aggregate-level effects previously identified as relevant to political trust. As discussed, we treated each "region/country by survey year" as an aggregate level case (e.g., Japan—2002, the Philippines—2014). For each case, we controlled the effects of GDP per capita, Gini index, political freedom status, and overall corruption ratings for that calendar year. The first variable, GDP per capita, is a standard measure of socioeconomic development and affluence, widely considered to be associated with political trust (Kim, 2010; Wang, 2005). We obtained statistics from the World Bank (2019a) measured in current constant international dollars. We modeled with logged GDP per capita terms to reduce the effects of extreme values and abnormality, considering the highly dispersed distribution of GDP per capita.

The second aggregate-level predictor of political trust was social inequality. We included the Gini index in our analysis as a measurement of social inequality. We retrieved the data from the World Bank (2019b).<sup>2</sup> The third aggregate-level variable was political freedom. We used the ordinal ratings by Freedom House (2017) to control for the political environment's influences on attitudes (Zhang, 2020). The ordinal categories range from "not free" to "partly free" and "free." Lastly, we included Transparency International's Corruption Index (Transparency International, 2019) as a macro-level measurement of the prevalence of corruption in each country or region. The 48 aggregate cases cover a good range of societies with variations in economic development levels, social inequality, political freedom, and corruption severity. By controlling these macro-level predictors, we hoped to identify individual political trust determinants with higher confidence without omitting important mechanisms.

We employed hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to accommodate both individual (Level 1) and aggregate (Level 2) effects. Individual respondents were nested within country-year observations, giving us 72,118 observations at the individual level and 48 observations at the country-year level. We fitted the models with random intercepts and fixed effects of predictors at both levels. As discussed, the individual level predictors included the wave of the survey, age, gender, religion, size of household, income level, and our focal variables: years of education, corruption perception, and location of residence (urban/rural). We added personal weights to all models to ensure within-nation representativeness. At the national level, we introduced logged GDP per capita (with purchase power parity adjusted) as a control variable. We built the regression models in the following sequence, giving us three models to test the five hypotheses:

*Model 1: Controls + Education + Corruption Perception + Urban (H<sub>1,2,3</sub>)*

*Model 2: Controls + Education \* Corruption Perception + Urban (H<sub>4</sub>)*

*Model 3: Controls + Education \* Corruption Perception \* Urban (H<sub>5</sub>)*

<sup>2</sup>For two country-year cases (Cambodia-2015 and Japan-2016) missing Gini indices, we used the nearest records (from the previous or next year) instead.



## Results

Our HLM modeling results are displayed in [Table 2](#), and the focal effects are plotted in [Figure 1](#). We first report some overall patterns emerging from all three models. Consistent with previous findings, aging is associated with higher trust in governments ([Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016](#)). Interestingly, however, gender shows no significant effect on political trust, thus disagreeing with most previous work finding women are more trusting of governments than men ([Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016](#)). Christians and Muslims trust their governments more than those with no religious affiliation. The household size is positively associated with political trust; this may not be surprising, as a large family is often associated with a traditional lifestyle and traditional values, such as Confucianism in East Asia. The finding for income is surprising, in that only the fourth quintile shows less trust, and it is a moderate effect (coeff. =  $-0.020$ ,  $p < .05$ ), thus challenging some previous results ([Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008](#)). This signals that those in the middle class are more likely to become critical citizens than members of a conservative lower class or those in the upper class who benefit from the status quo ([Zhang et al., 2017](#)).

The macro-level covariates also show consistent patterns across the models. First, consistent with the critical citizen thesis and modernization theory, the logged GDP per capita negatively affects political trust ([Welzel, 2018](#)). Each unit of increase in logged GDP per capita leads to a difference of  $-0.180$  in political trust ( $p < .01$ ). Take Japan—2011 and Cambodia—2008 as examples: the former's GDP per capita is \$48,168, and the latter's is approximately \$742. The natural logarithms would be  $10.78$  minus  $6.61$ , which equals  $4.17$ . For these two countries with such a salient income gap, the predicted political trust would differ by  $0.751$  ( $4.17 * 0.180$ ) on a 1–4 scale. Second, governments in unequal and nondemocratic societies show more trust. This finding may seem surprising, but it is consistent with previous work finding authoritarian regimes are well-supported ([Wang, 2005](#); [Li, 2008](#)). Possible explanations include social desirability bias, nationalism propaganda, and mass persuasion in these contexts.

Next, we turn to the models in [Table 2](#). Model 1 tests H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, and H<sub>3</sub>, examining the main effects of education, corruption perception, and urban residence on political trust. The model supports all three hypotheses. First, education is negatively associated with political trust. Each additional year of education decreases political trust by  $0.008$  points ( $p < .001$ ) on the 1–4 scale. For example, the trust of a university graduate (16 years of education) is  $0.08$  points lower than that of an elementary school graduate (6 years of education), with other factors held constant. Second, the effect of corruption perceptions is also salient: the trust of a respondent with one additional point in perceived corruption prevalence drops by  $0.105$  ( $p < .001$ ). Third, living in an urban area negatively affects political trust (coeff. =  $-0.079$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the critical citizen thesis. Model 2 adds the education by corruption perception index to test H<sub>4</sub>. Although all previous findings stay the same, the interaction term is significant (coeff. =  $-0.002$ ,  $p < .001$ ). That is to say, H<sub>4</sub> is supported: the political trust of better-educated people is susceptible to their views of corruption. When well-educated individuals see corruption as prevalent, they distrust the government even more than their less-educated comparators do. This significant finding of a two-way interaction suggests that the critical citizen thesis and the performance-evaluation thesis are valid, and the effects enhance each other.

Table 2.  
*Multilevel Models Predicting Political Trust (SE in Parentheses)*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	2.599 <sup>***</sup> (0.553)	2.554 <sup>***</sup> (0.555)	2.513 <sup>***</sup> (0.554)
Individual level controls			
Age in years (18–99)	0.002 <sup>***</sup> (0.000)	0.002 <sup>***</sup> (0.000)	0.002 <sup>***</sup> (0.000)
Male (female = 0)	0.002 (0.005)	0.001 (0.005)	0.001 (0.005)
Religion (none = 0)			
Buddhist	–0.003 (0.009)	–0.003 (0.009)	–0.004 (0.009)
Christian	0.032 <sup>**</sup> (0.012)	0.032 <sup>**</sup> (0.012)	0.032 <sup>**</sup> (0.012)
Islamic	0.098 <sup>***</sup> (0.016)	0.096 <sup>***</sup> (0.016)	0.095 <sup>***</sup> (0.016)
Other beliefs	0.026 <sup>*</sup> (0.012)	0.025 <sup>*</sup> (0.012)	0.025 <sup>*</sup> (0.012)
Marital status (single = 0)			
Married	–0.009 (0.007)	–0.010 (0.007)	–0.010 (0.007)
Divorced/separated/widowed	–0.026 <sup>*</sup> (0.013)	–0.026 <sup>*</sup> (0.013)	–0.026 <sup>*</sup> (0.013)
Household size (0–9)	0.003 (0.001)	0.003 (0.001)	0.003 (0.001)
Income levels (lowest as reference)			
2nd quintile	–0.015 (0.008)	–0.014 (0.008)	–0.014 (0.008)
3rd quintile	–0.010 (0.008)	–0.010 (0.008)	–0.010 (0.008)
4th quintile	–0.020 <sup>*</sup> (0.009)	–0.020 <sup>*</sup> (0.009)	–0.020 <sup>*</sup> (0.009)
5th richest quintile	0.013 (0.010)	0.013 (0.010)	0.014 (0.010)
Country-year level controls			
GDP per capita (logged)	–0.180 <sup>**</sup> (0.061)	–0.179 <sup>**</sup> (0.061)	–0.179 <sup>**</sup> (0.061)
Gini (0–100)	0.031 <sup>***</sup> (0.008)	0.031 <sup>***</sup> (0.008)	0.031 <sup>***</sup> (0.008)
Freedom house rate (not free = 0)			
Not free	0.736 <sup>***</sup> (0.090)	0.733 <sup>***</sup> (0.090)	0.733 <sup>***</sup> (0.090)
Partly free	0.070 (0.097)	0.069 (0.098)	0.068 (0.098)
Transparency corruption index	0.013 <sup>***</sup> (0.004)	0.013 <sup>***</sup> (0.004)	0.013 <sup>***</sup> (0.004)
Focal variables			
Years of education (0–20)	–0.008 <sup>***</sup> (0.001)	–0.003 <sup>*</sup> (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)

*Continued*

Table 2. *Continued*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Corruption perception (0–6)	–0.105 <sup>***</sup> (0.002)	–0.086 <sup>***</sup> (0.004)	–0.076 <sup>***</sup> (0.006)
Urban (rural = 0)	–0.079 <sup>***</sup> (0.007)	–0.078 <sup>***</sup> (0.007)	0.007 (0.027)
Interaction effects			
Education * corruption perception		–0.002 <sup>***</sup> (0.000)	–0.003 <sup>***</sup> (0.001)
Education * urban			–0.009 <sup>***</sup> (0.003)
Corruption perception * urban			–0.022 <sup>*</sup> (0.009)
Education * corruption perception * urban			0.002 <sup>**</sup> (0.001)
AIC	163,448.244	163,424.788	<b>163,418.769</b>
Log likelihood	–81,700.122	–81,687.394	<b>–81,681.385</b>
No. of obs.	72,118	72,118	72,118
No. of groups: CY	48	48	48
Var: CY (intercept)	0.045	0.045	0.045
Var: residual	0.504	0.504	0.504

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

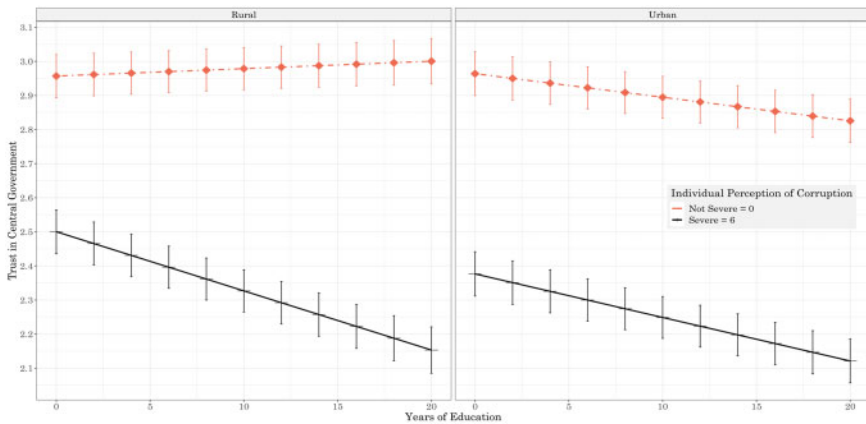
Model 3 adds the three-way interaction between education, corruption perception, and urban residence to test H<sub>5</sub> (both H<sub>5a</sub> and H<sub>5b</sub>). Findings on other covariates remain stable, and the interaction term is significant (coeff. = 0.002,  $p < .001$ ), indicating H<sub>5</sub> is supported. Based on our findings in Model 3, we plotted the three-way interaction shown in Figure 1 to illustrate the specific interaction effects. Different patterns emerge in the figure for rural and urban Asians. For rural residents, education and corruption perception interact significantly. The red dashed line representing “perceive no corruption” and the black solid line representing “perceive high corruption” diverge as education increases. In a simpler version, for rural Asians who perceive low corruption, education does not affect trust; for rural Asians who perceive high corruption, education leads to distrust. When we turn to urban Asians, the interaction effect disappears. The slopes for both high corruption perception and low corruption perception groups are almost the same. In other words, for urban Asians, education leads to distrust, regardless of whether they see a high or low level of corruption; corruption perception associates with political distrust, and this association is independent of educational attainment. In sum, their main effects still exist, but these two effects do not interact.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Education and perceptions of government corruption are commonly examined predictors of political trust, but the existing findings are not yet conclusive. This article tested

Figure 1.

*Interaction effects of education, corruption perception, and urban/rural in predicting political trust.*



*Note.* Data from the Wave 1–4 of the ABS project ( $N = 72,118$ ). Results from Model 3. Confidence intervals at 95%. Respondents from rural (left panel) and urban areas (right panel) are compared. People who see the governments as corrupt (perceived corruption = 6, severe) are represented by the black dots connected by solid lines; people who hold positive perception (perceived corruption = 0, not severe) are represented by the red dots connected by dashed lines.

the critical citizen thesis and the performance evaluation thesis in the Asian context, paying specific attention to the interaction effects among education, perceptions of corruption, residence location, or the urban–rural divide. We are curious about how educational effects are moderated in different social contexts. The diverse socioeconomic development levels, cultural backgrounds, and political environments across East and Southeast Asia, along with the rich data provided by the ABS, gave us an excellent opportunity to probe the mechanisms driving the formation of political trust. Drawing on the four waves of data from the ABS project (2001–2016), we found evidence of the following. First, high education, high perception of corruption, and urban residence all lead to political trust erosion. These findings are consistent with previous work and support both the critical citizen thesis and the performance evaluation thesis (Norris, 1999; Zhang, Sun, & Cao, 2020). Even though others have reported similar findings (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Morris & Klesner, 2010), we make an important contribution to the literature by testing the theories in the context of contemporary Asia. We found Asians are not held back by Confucianism or a history of authoritarianism, both of which are often theorized as preventing people from criticizing political authorities (Inoguchi, 2017; Kim, 2010; Wang, 2005).

Second, education and perceptions of government corruption interact with each other in affecting political trust. Others have similar findings for societies in North America and Europe (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). For most societies, the implication is that their governments would face challenges with the combination of a rapidly growing education system and a distrusting mass. However, for governments who

could build a good public image, the story could be different. As the literature on “authoritarian resilience” posits (Nathan, 2017), by determining what the media can publish, authoritarian governments can influence perceptions and eventually ensure a high level of political trust (Yang & Tang, 2010). This explains why cases like China, Singapore, and Vietnam have low perceptions of corruption and high political trust despite expanding higher education in recent decades. Third, the interaction between education and perceptions of corruption is moderated by the location of residence. Rural residents’ political trust is more influenced by perceptions of corruption when they are better educated. This three-way interaction is significant in rural areas but insignificant in urban ones. The finding ties into a long tradition in political science, sociology, and social psychology (Han, 2012; Huntington, 2006; Tilly, 1967). More recent empirical works also note the different norms in rural and urban communities and connect these to social stability and contentious politics (Li, 2008; Scott, 2008).

Our findings add to the literature on modernization, urbanization, and democratization. For instance, our finding that educated rural Asians are the most sensitive to government misconduct sheds light on the notion of the “middle-income trap” or the “democracy deconsolidation” thesis. It helps to explain why some developing countries are more likely to experience social unrest, while advanced industrial countries do not (Kim, 2010; Li, 2008; Wang, 2016). Another interesting finding is that higher education levels do not lead to less trust among rural residents who perceive less corruption. However, more education does lead to less trust among urban residents who perceive less corruption. The conventional “critical citizen” thesis cannot explain such a difference. We argue that it may be explained by Asian cultural roots, especially the values emphasizing political loyalty and order such as Confucianism (Chang & Chu 2006; Inoguchi, 2017). In Western countries, education leads to political distrust regardless of specific moral context; in Asia, however, educated rural elites evaluate their governments in a “fair” manner. If the governments and officials show integrity and good performance, rural elites will reward them with even more loyalty and trust. On the contrary, if the governments and public servants fail to do so, rural elites will be more critical. In this regard, our study supports the “Asian exceptionalism” thesis to some extent (Chang & Chu, 2006; Scott, 2008; Wang, 2005) and partially answers the “authoritarian resilience” puzzle (Li, 2008; Nathan, 2017).

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, as the ABS data are taken from longitudinal cross-sectional surveys without a panel design, the findings can only be interpreted as suggestive of causality. Specifically, we have no evidence to support speculation on dynamics that happen within an individual’s lifetime (e.g., a rural resident moves to the city) and how that would change one’s political trust over time. Second, our study covered a relatively short period and therefore, did not consider the temporal dimension. As the ABS project (2001–2016) started after the “Third Wave” of democratization (the 1990s), we cannot see impacts resulting from the ensuing social transformations such as regime changes. Future research can broaden the comparative and temporal scope to see how the mechanisms work in other historical and social contexts, with appropriate data sources and methods. Nevertheless, our work suggests a promising way to track the political implications of education expansion and urbanization in Asia and elsewhere.

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### Biographical Notes

Anli Jiang (PhD, University of Macau) is a lecturer in the Center for Governance Studies, Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai and the School of Government, Beijing Normal University. Her research focuses on political sociology, public opinion, urban management, and social control in China.

Tony Huiquan Zhang (PhD, University of Toronto) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Macau. His research interest includes public opinion, social movements, and comparative politics in East Asia.