

# Changes in the Political Trust of Taiwanese Students after Cross-Polity Contact\*

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## Abstract

Changes in the political trust among Taiwanese students after visiting mainland China symbolize the effectiveness of the CPC's political propaganda. This issue is critically related to the stability of Taiwan's democratic polity and hence warrants the close attention of supporters of democracy from around the world. A total of 516 Taiwanese youth who visited mainland China on exchange programs were studied. Four hypotheses were proposed by combining the theories of social contact, political socialization, and rational choice. The results show that after the students visited mainland China, the number of those with greater political trust in their home country was 13.46% higher than those with lower trust. The average change significantly increased by 0.06. All four hypotheses were supported by empirical evidence. After the cross-polity contact, students' perceived hostility of the Communist Party of China was reduced, or they were more satisfied with the level of Taiwan's democracy, or their evaluation of Taiwan's industrial prospects were better, or they less willing to go to mainland China for career development, leading to greater trust in Taiwanese officials. This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by com-

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bining true-acquaintance contact and political mobilization to propose the perceived hostility hypothesis for changes in political trust.

**Keywords:** institutional performance, political learning, political mobilization, self-interest, true acquaintance contact

## Introduction

There are differing views within the academic circle regarding the impact of cross-polity contact on the political attitudes of people from the home country. The negative impacts perspective pointed out that after Chinese students studied abroad, they became more critical of China's official ideology (Zhao and Xie 1992), more supportive of Western democracy (Han and Chen 2016), and more pessimistic about China's present and future (Li and Feng 2018). Those who pursued short-term studies in Taiwan also experienced a significant reduction in their trust of Chinese officials and political institutions (Wang 2019), and became more supportive of Taiwan (Wang and Lin 2023). There was a negatively influenced in the Taiwanese identity of Taiwanese students who visited mainland China (Wang 2020). The positive impacts perspective found that after Chinese students studied in Taiwan or the United States, their sense of nationalism was awakened and they became more patriotic (Hail 2015; Zhang 2019). After Taiwanese students studied in mainland China, most of them distinguished themselves strongly from the local Chinese even if they planned to continue staying there for career development (Lan and Wu 2016). The no impact perspective believed that after Taiwanese students attended exchange programs in mainland China, there was no change in their national identity or existing stance on the issue of Taiwan's independence versus its unification with China (Keng and Tseng 2010).

Changes in political trust among Taiwanese students after visiting mainland China symbolize the effectiveness of the CPC's political propaganda, whereas political trust reflects the people's judgment of the political system and those in power (Dennison, Davidov, and Seddig 2020). Political trust is not only related to the evaluation of democracy (Meer and Hakhverdian 2017), but also affects the stability of the democratic polity (Quaranta 2018). The Taiwanese who have greater political trust are more inclined to support the ruling party (Wang et al. 2022), and are more

satisfied with the president's performance in terms of governance (Chen 2018). The rise of the Chinese model has spurred the ebbing of democracy and a revival of autocracy (Plattner 2015). The CPC demonstrated the effectiveness of the Chinese model through such interpersonal exchanges (Ambrosio 2010), which involve the application of sharp power to erode Taiwan's democracy and freedom (Wu 2019). Thus, global supporters of democracy should pay close attention to and monitor such efforts (Walker and Ludwig 2017).

To strengthen the impact of its sharp power, the CPC began to accord Taiwanese people the same treatments as those enjoyed by Chinese nationals. The 2014 Sunflower Student Movement was seen as the effort of the Taiwanese youth in resisting economic integration with China (C. M. Wang 2017). This prompted the Communist Party of China (CPC) to strengthen its exchange programs with this population group (Wang 2022). General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that Taiwanese compatriots visiting mainland China would gradually be accorded the same treatments as those enjoyed by Chinese nationals. The aforementioned declarations were first presented in the "31 Measures", which referred to the preferential policies for Taiwan that were announced and implemented in 2018. Specifically, the first 12 policies accorded Taiwanese enterprises with the same treatments as those enjoyed by Chinese enterprises, while the next 19 policies accorded Taiwanese people with the same treatments as those enjoyed by their Chinese compatriots when they visited mainland China to study, work, start a business venture, or live (Wang and Lee 2020).

In the above discussion, several important questions were raised. Does the experience of visiting mainland China change the political trust that Taiwanese youth have in their home country? If so, is the change positive or negative? What are the factors affecting this change? To answer these questions, 516 Taiwanese youth who visited mainland China in 2016–2019 were taken as research subjects in this study. Four hypotheses were proposed by combining the theories of social contact, political socialization, and rational choice. Next, the panel survey was adopted and a re-

gression model was used to validate the hypotheses.

## **Literature review and research hypotheses**

### ***Definition of political trust***

Political trust refers to the degree to which people believe that their government's governance meets their expectations (Jhang 2022). It involves three aspects: cognition, emotion, and evaluation (Mishler and Rose 2001). While discussing political support, Easton (1975) proposed that the targets of political trust are based on three categories of subjects. These have since expanded into five categories: political community and actors, and regime principles, performance, and institutions (Norris 1999).

Using the method for measuring political trust, the aforementioned targets can be simplified into two categories: the subjects and connotations of trust. The subjects of political trust include political community, polity form, and regime institutions. Among these, regime institutions are most often used as indicators (He and Yang 2019). The connotations of political trust refer specifically to the policy formulation, integrity, and reliability of political figures (Li 2013). Arrangements were not made for the subjects of this study to visit any Chinese regime institutions during their stay in China. However, through their personal experiences or mass media observations, they were able to compare the words and deeds of the CPC with those of Taiwanese officials. Hence, the connotations of political trust were adopted as the measurement method. In sum, the political trust concept examined in this paper refers to the degree of public affirmation toward political figures in aspects of decision-making, integrity, and credibility.

### ***Origins of changes in political trust***

There are two perspectives regarding the origins of political trust: cultural and

institutional. The cultural perspective advocates that political trust is exogenous and is a personality characteristic formed by an individual based on his/her life experiences. This perspective can be subdivided into assumptions with different facets: the modernization assumption claims that higher educational standards create critical citizens; the political mobilization assumption emphasizes the influence of official propaganda and education; and the cultural value assumption focuses on the role of Confucianism and interpersonal trust. In comparison, the institutional perspective advocates that political trust is endogenous and an individual's rational response to institutional performance. Under this perspective, the governmental performance assumption emphasizes the influence of the government's economic and political performance; and the self-interest assumption focuses on an individual's calculation of material gains and losses, and his/her perceived social mobility (Dassonneville and McAllister 2021; Steinhardt 2012; Su et al. 2015; Wong, Wan, and Hsiao 2011; Yang and Tang 2010).

In summary, the cultural perspective emphasizes the influence of national culture and individual socialization on political trust and the institutional perspective emphasizes governmental performance and the impact of individuals on the evaluation of political performance (Mishler and Rose 2001; Micheli and Taylor 2024). However, the focus of this study was the changes in the political trust among Taiwanese students in their own country. The cause for these changes was the process of visiting mainland China, and individuals were mainly influenced by new information and experiences. The literature has pointed out that an individual's evaluation and trust of his/her own country's government can be affected by receiving information from foreign media or having personal experiences overseas (Li and Feng 2018). The key to these changes is the change in the reference point (Huang 2015).

The exchange program itineraries for Taiwanese students visiting mainland China can be generally segmented into three main components: specialized lectures, guided tours, and free exploration. To illustrate, the "2019 Winter Chinese Culture Study Camp, Shanghai Group" included five specialized lectures covering

topics such as “Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship Among Youth at Fudan University School of Innovation and Entrepreneurship”, “Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship—Insights from Participants of the Fudan University Zijing Valley Innovation and Entrepreneurship Camp”, “The Might of Our Nation—An In-depth Introduction to the Development and Overview of the Yangtze River Economic Belt,” “The Role of Literature in Traditional Chinese Culture” and “The Impact of the Shanghai Import Expo on the City’s Development”. The group toured five attractions in Shanghai, such as a river cruise along the Huangpu River, as well as visits to the Oriental Pearl Tower, the Shanghai City History Development Exhibition Hall, the Sun Yat-Sen Former Residence Memorial, and Zhujiyajiao Town. In Suzhou, they visited four attractions, including the Humble Administrator’s Garden, the Suzhou Museum, and the Pingjiang Historical Culture Block, and enjoyed a performance of Suzhou Pingtan. In Hangzhou, they visited nine distinct sites, including a boat excursion on the West Lake, the Dream Town, the G20 Summit venue, the Hefang Street Historic District, Yuewang Temple, the China Silk Museum, Leifeng Tower, Pan Tianshou Art Museum, and the bookstore of the China Academy of Art. For the day of free activities in Shanghai, the organizers offered an optional self-paid trip to Shanghai Disneyland, providing shuttle service for convenience. However, students who were not interested in Disneyland could explore the local area on their own.

The itinerary described above provided the students with a lot of new information and experiences that may have generated new perceptions and attitudes. First, their existing prejudices against mainland China may have been eliminated. Second, they were able to compare methods for development adopted on both sides of the strait, which may have made it possible for them to revise their evaluations of both countries’ political and economic performances. They may have even revised evaluations that affected their future self-interests. Ultimately, these may lead to changes in political trust. The aforementioned “prejudices” can be classified under the scope of the cultural perspective, whereas “comparisons” and “interests” belong to the scope of the institutional perspective. Specifically, “prejudices” are linked to the so-

cial contact theory; “comparisons” are related to political learning, which falls under the scope of the political socialization theory; and “interests” constitute the focus of the rational choice theory. The relationships among these three theories and changes in political trust are described below.

### ***Social contact and changes in political trust***

The social contact theory advocates that intergroup interaction affect the attitudes and behaviors of group members. True-acquaintance contact can help eliminate existing prejudices, but casual contact may strengthen those prejudices instead. A true-acquaintance contact involves mutual trust and understanding, like that between friends and relatives (Allport 1954). It increases an individual’s cognition of external groups, reduces anxiety over intergroup contact, and enhances empathy and the adoption of opinions (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). As a result, it is easier to eliminate prejudice. In contrast, casual contact lacks mutual trust and understanding. The contact process may strengthen an individual’s intergroup anxiety or group-oriented perceived threats, and does not generate empathy (Hewstone et al. 2014). Thus, it is not conducive to eliminating prejudices.

The Taiwanese generally do not have a positive opinion of the CPC regime for various reasons (Sobel, Haynes, and Zheng 2010). First, the CPC has not promised to abandon the use of military force against Taiwan. Next, it obstructs Taiwan’s participation in international organizations and activities, and blocks Taiwan from participating in mechanisms for regional economic integration (Wang, Lee, and Yu 2011). It has especially adopted a tougher stance toward Taiwan after Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party won the Taiwanese presidential elections in 2016. The CPC’s People’s Liberation Army has threatened to use military force against Taiwan if it seeks independence (Templeman 2020). The Taiwanese have sensed the increase in the CPC’s hostility day by day, with 69.4% and 54.6% of them believing that the CPC regime is hostile and unfriendly toward the Taiwanese



government and people, respectively (Mainland Affairs Council 2019). Before their visit to mainland China, the Taiwanese students may have the prejudice that the CPC was overly hostile toward them. Hence, the regime hoped to reduce that prejudice through true-acquaintance contact.

Taiwanese students' visits to mainland China provided the opportunity for members of two different societies to come in contact with each other. Repeated behaviors of social contact can establish friendship, so the greater the intergroup contact, the lower the prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). When the willingness to communicate and interact increases, the positive effects of trust and cooperation produced are more than that from mere increases in the number of exchanges (Wu 2017). Taiwanese students signed up for the exchange program on a voluntary basis, meaning that the participants already had the willingness to communicate and interact. The CPC hosted them upon their arrival, and they only had to pay for the group travel and visa fees. The communication methods described above were similar to those used in true-acquaintance contact and were based on friendship and goodwill. Therefore, these were expected to help Taiwanese students reduce their perceived hostility of the CPC. With the reduction in that perception, the students can reflect on the accuracy of the CPC's image as being promoted by Taiwanese officials. If they found the portrayal to be accurate, their trust in Taiwanese officials may increase, and vice versa.

This study proposed that although their perceived hostility was reduced after visiting mainland China because of the true-acquaintance contact, they would affirm—rather than doubt—the image of the CPC as promoted by the Taiwanese officials. The key was their alertness to the CPC's intention for reunification with Taiwan (Wang and Li 2012). This intention is well-known world over. The Taiwanese government likens the CPC's preferential policies toward Taiwan to a sugar-coated poison. In response to the CPC's "31 Measures" on Taiwan, the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) pointed out that the CPC was attempting to use benefits in exchange

for political recognition by Taiwan (Central News Agency, 2018. 2. 28).<sup>1</sup> Under the CPC's deliberate arrangements, Taiwanese students visiting mainland China get a taste of the sweet outer layer, which includes meticulous hospitality and policy benefits on par with those accorded to mainland citizens. Though the CPC's ultimate goal of unifying Taiwan—the poison beneath the sugar coating—is ever-present, its impact is a mutual load borne by all Taiwanese. Its onset seems both uncertain and distant, unlike the immediate and personal gains from the sugar coating. Therefore, Taiwanese students who visit mainland China may perceive a lesser degree of hostility.

To sum up, although the kindness or preferential treatments accorded by the CPC may have reduced the students' degree of perceived hostility, their alertness to the CPC's intention for reunification may have also been activated. This may have led them to agree the preferential treatments as “sugar-coated poison”, thereby proving the accuracy of the Taiwanese officials' propaganda. This in turn enhanced the students' trust in the latter. Accordingly, this study proposed **Hypothesis 1** as follows:

**H1: When the degree of perceived hostility decreases, political trust in Taiwanese officials will increase.**

### *Political socialization and changes in political trust*

Changes in political trust among Taiwanese students after visiting mainland China can be considered the result of political learning, which is a component of political socialization. At the individual level, political socialization emphasizes one's unique growth, and includes political learning at various stages of life (Greenstein

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<sup>1</sup> Chai, Sze-Chia. 2018. “MAC: Mainland China's ‘31 Measures’ for Taiwan is a means of trading benefits for recognition.” (in Chinese) *Central News Agency*. February 28. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/201802280154.aspx> (accessed September 3, 2023).

1968). Political socialization from the perspective of the social system refers to the process of transmitting political culture from one generation to the next (Langton 1969). The main agents of political socialization include one's family, school, peer groups, and mass media (Chaffee, Ward, and Tipton 1970).

For Taiwanese students, political socialization during their stay in China involved political learning at the overall and individual levels. When they attended lectures and participated in tour itineraries that were officially arranged by the CPC, they received political socialization similar to school education. They also got to enjoy free-and-easy time, when they got to experience social life in mainland China. They were able to discuss what they had seen and heard in mainland China with their peers during the exchange program. Thus, their peer group and the mass media affected their political socialization.

The visit to mainland China allows Taiwanese students to establish new interpersonal networks. The larger the network, the greater the diversity, leading to more opportunities for unexpected information or experiences (Chen, He, and Li 2020). After international contact, it is natural for those who have crossed borders to compare what they have seen and heard with the situation in their home country (Wang 2017). According to the aforementioned institutional perspective, unexpected information or experiences for students can originate from their comparison of the governments on both sides of the strait in terms of political and economic performance.

The level of satisfaction with democracy can be used as an indicator for political performance because it is a comprehensive indicator of the people's level of support for the current government, governmental system, and democratic politics (Christensen, Yamamoto, and Aoyagi 2020). It is universally recognized that Taiwan has a greater degree of democratization compared to Mainland China (Economist Intelligence Unit 2022). Political and human rights in China are deteriorating by the day, with many cases of violation involving the youth. Chinese officials practice a bureaucratic style, and the distrust that the public has for local officials is evident (Ratigan and Rabin 2020). After students from mainland China visited Taiwan, they

had unexpected impressions of Taiwanese officials being “modest and austere”, “friendly and showing goodwill”, and “restrained.” They even advocated that the Chinese government should learn from the Taiwanese government (C. C. Wang 2017). Hence, it can be inferred that the political learning of Taiwanese students during their trip to mainland China, be it from the influence of their peer group and mass media or from personal observations and experiences, can deepen their understanding of the disparity in democracy and freedom between the two countries across the strait. This would increase their level of satisfaction with Taiwan’s democratic system, and eventually, their political trust in Taiwanese officials. Based on the above, this study proposed **Hypothesis 2** as follows:

**H2: When the level of satisfaction with democracy increases, political trust in Taiwanese officials will also increase.**

Industrial prospects can be used as an indicator for economic performance. The CPC’s rule is not legitimized by democracy. Instead, it is derived from the maintenance of social stability to sustain economic development (Eaton and Hasmath 2021; Yang 2016). Thus, the economic performance of the Taiwanese government may be inferior when compared to that of the mainland Chinese government. China’s gross domestic product (GDP) for 2010 surpassed that of Japan, making it the second largest global economy after the United States. China is both the world’s largest consumer of most products and a global manufacturing power. Since the Financial Crisis of 2008, China has also continuously acted as the main engine driving global economic growth (Allison 2017; Wen 2016).

During the exchange program, the Taiwanese students only visited first-tier cities in mainland China and did not have the opportunity to come in contact with poor rural areas. They may have been shocked by the rapid economic development and urban construction in the cities. Therefore, when Taiwanese students compared the economic and industrial prospects on both sides of the strait, they may have thought

that Taiwan was inferior to China, causing their trust in Taiwanese officials to diminish. Based on this, the study proposed **Hypothesis 3** as follows:

**H3: When the evaluation of industrial prospects decreases, political trust in Taiwanese officials will also decrease.**

### *Rational choice and changes in political trust*

The willingness of Taiwanese students to go to mainland China to seek opportunities for career development can be treated as an indicator of rational choice affecting changes in political trust. This is because the focus of the CPC's exchange programs with Taiwan is to attract Taiwanese youth to pursue development in mainland China. Rational choice emphasizes that individuals' self-interests affect their attitudes toward policies (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). Self-interest is the core concept underlying rational choice influencing policy propositions (Lau and Heldman 2009). It emphasizes self-centeredness, functions at the material level, and determines individual behaviors in the short-to-medium period (Sears et al. 1980). This theoretical perspective can be linked with the aforementioned institutional perspective to analyze changes in political trust by adding an individual's calculations of his/her material gains and losses, and perceptions of his/her own social mobility.

The CPC has packaged seven preferential treatments and developmental benefits to attract Taiwanese students to study in mainland China (Global Times, 2020.7.14).<sup>2</sup> The CPC also provides Taiwanese youth with preferential policies for them to work (start a business) in mainland China (Wang and Lee 2020). However, Taiwanese students continue to face many risks when they go to mainland China for career development. These can be divided into general and individual risks (Mainland Affairs Council 2018). Taiwanese students may experience the aforementioned

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<sup>2</sup> Global Times. 2020. "Eight things that Taiwan's MAC will pretend not to know." (in Chinese) *Global Times*, July 14. <https://taiwan.huanqiu.com/article/3z2x5l50kct> (accessed July 6, 2023).

costs and benefits more profoundly after visiting mainland China. They would determine their self-interests by calculating their personal material gains and losses, and evaluating their perception of personal social mobility. This would, in turn, affect their willingness to go to mainland China for career development. When the willingness of Taiwanese students to go to mainland China for future development increases, it means they have evaluated that their future prospects for development in mainland China are better. They do not think that the Taiwanese government can provide them with better benefits. With this change, and based on the rationalization of evaluation and behaviors, their trust in Taiwanese officials may decline. Accordingly, this study proposed Hypothesis 4 as follows:

**H4: When the willingness to go to mainland China for future development increases, political trust in Taiwanese officials will decrease.**

## Research Design

### *Measurement of variables*

*Changes in political trust.* There are three aspects to political trust: policy formulation, credibility, and ethics. Each aspect was measured using two questions. The policy formulation aspect included questions on “long-term planning” and “putting people’s interests first”: Q1. “The government lacks long-term planning and often just does what it happens to think of” and Q2. “The government places people’s welfare as the top priority while deciding on major policies.” The credibility aspect included questions on “correct decision-making” and “frugal utilization of tax money”: Q3. “The government’s actions are mostly correct” and Q4. “Government officials often waste the taxes paid by the people.” The ethics aspect included questions on “ethical integrity” and “credible statements”: Q5. “Most government officials have integrity and will not engage in corruption” and Q6. “I do not believe

the statements made by the head of government on television or in the newspapers.”

Four options were given for each of these six questions: “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “agree”, and “strongly agree.” The responses to Q1, Q4, and Q6 were subject to reverse processing. Next, the answers to all six questions were combined and averaged to calculate the Taiwanese students’ degree of trust in Taiwanese officials. The minimum and maximum values were 1 and 4, respectively. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value of the six questions was 0.67. The value for changes in political trust could be obtained by subtracting the value of the first wave from that of the second wave of political trust.

*Changes in perceived hostility.* There were two questions for measuring perceived hostility: “Do you think the mainland Chinese government has a friendly or hostile attitude toward the Taiwanese government?” and “Do you think the mainland Chinese government has a friendly or hostile attitude toward the Taiwanese?” The options in sequence were “very friendly”, “friendly”, “unfriendly”, and “very unfriendly”, which were coded from 1 to 4, respectively. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value of the two questions was 0.66. The answers to the two questions were summed up before taking the mean value for perceived hostility. Subtracting the first wave from the second gave the change in the value of perceived hostility.

*Changes in the level of satisfaction with democracy.* There were two questions for this variable, which measured the level of democracy and overall satisfaction (Huang 2011). The first was: “Overall, what do you think is the level of democracy in Taiwan?” The options were “completely democratic”, “democratic but with some minor issues,” “democratic but with many issues,” and “undemocratic.” The second question was: “Overall, are you satisfied with the way democracy is being practiced in Taiwan?” The options “very satisfied”, “satisfied”, “unsatisfied”, and “very dissatisfied.” These options were coded sequentially from 4 to 1. The answers to both questions were added before obtaining the mean value as the evaluation of political performance. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value was 0.56. The change in the evaluation of political performance was determined by subtracting the first wave from the second.

*Changes in the evaluation of industrial prospects.* The question for this variable was: “Do you agree with the statement that Taiwan’s industrial prospects are worrying?” The options “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “agree”, and “strongly agree” were coded 4 to 1, respectively. The larger the value, the better the evaluation. The change in evaluation of economic performance was determined by subtracting the value of the first wave from the second.

*Changes in the willingness to go to mainland China for career development.* The two questions to measure the willingness to go to mainland China for career development were: “Are you willing to go to mainland China to study?” and “Are you willing to go to mainland China to work or start a business?” The options were “very unwilling”, “unwilling”, “willing”, and “very willing.” These were coded from 1 to 4, respectively. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value for both questions was 0.71. The answers to both questions were summed up before taking the mean value, which represented the willingness to go to mainland China for career development. Subtracting the first value from the second indicated the change in willingness.

*Control variables.* Age, gender, ethnic backgrounds, and past experience(s) of visiting mainland China were set as the control variables to observe the impact of the population’s background. Gender was categorized into male and female. The question for ethnic backgrounds was: “Is your father a Hakka or Hokkien from Taiwan, a native of the various provinces and cities in mainland China, or an aboriginal?” For statistical analysis, the respondents were divided into two categories: Minnan and non-Minnan. For experience(s) visiting mainland China, the question was: “Excluding this exchange program, how many times have you been to mainland China?” There were two categories for statistical analysis: have and have not been to China previously.

### **Data source**

A total of 516 Taiwanese youth who visited mainland China during their win-



ter or summer vacations between 2016 and 2019 were surveyed. Two waves of questionnaires were distributed. The first was completed by the respondents after boarding the plane in Taiwan and before arriving in mainland China. The second was completed at the end of the exchange program before they returned to Taiwan. A comparison of the results of both waves revealed a change in the respondents' attitudes before and after visiting mainland China. The 516 panel samples were from 12 groups of youth who attended the exchange program, with 3 groups participating each year (Appendix 1).

As the survey focused on the cross-strait issue, which is a sensitive topic, there were concerns that the respondents may have had reservations or may have refused to provide answers. To make the respondents feel at ease while answering and to avoid the interviewer effect, an anonymous self-completing method was adopted, where no identification code was assigned to any of the questionnaires. For panel study, email addresses were compared to identify the two questionnaires completed by the same respondent. Few respondents entered different email addresses in each wave. Even so, the two questionnaires completed by the same respondent may have still been matched successfully by comparing other data such as the year of birth, gender, educational background, county and city of residence, and ethnic backgrounds. Some questionnaires could not be compared successfully because of incomplete basic data.

Although two waves of 568 questionnaires were retrieved, panel study was successfully conducted for only 519 questionnaires. A respondent aged 14 years and two others aged above 30 years were excluded because they did not belong in the normal age range for college or graduate students. Thus, the number of respondents included in the analysis was 516.

The respondents were aged between 17 and 29 years. This was the first visit to mainland China for 50.58% of them. Further, 30.81% and 69.19% were male and female, respectively. Undergrad students comprised the majority at 74.22%; whereas 21.12% were graduate students, 2.71% were from other educational systems, and

1.94% had graduated recently. Further, 74.61% were Minnan and 11.05% Hakkas from Taiwan, and 7.36% were from various other provinces and cities in mainland China. By household registration, the respondents were distributed across 21 counties and cities in Taiwan: 35.08% were from Northern Taiwan (Keelung, Taipei, New Taipei City, Taoyuan, Hsinchu, and Miaoli), 18.02% were from Central Taiwan (Taichung, Changhua, Nantou, Yunlin, and Chiayi), 41.86% were from Southern Taiwan (Tainan, Kaohsiung, and Pingtung), 1.36% were from Eastern Taiwan (Yilan, Hualien, and Taitung), and 2.33% were from the Outlying Islands (Penghu and Kinmen).

## Data analysis and discussion

### *Descriptive statistics of changes in political trust*

The first wave of responses was subtracted from the second to obtain the change in values to reflect changes in the six indicators of political trust among Taiwanese students before and after they visited mainland China (Table 1). As many as 66.86% showed no change vis-à-vis “long-term planning.” There was a difference of 4.68% between those with positive and negative changes (18.91% versus 14.23%). The mean change was 0.05 ( $p = 0.06$ ), and the standard deviation was 0.62. A total of 67.32% showed no change with respect to “putting the people’s interests first.” There was a difference of 6.06% between those with positive and negative changes (19.37% versus 13.31%). The mean change was 0.07 ( $p = 0.02$ ), and the standard deviation was 0.61. Whereas 68.16% remained unchanged for “correct decision-making”, while those with positive change (21.09%) exceeded those with negative change (10.74%) by 10.35%. The mean change and standard deviations were 0.11 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and 0.60, respectively.

As many as 66.21% remained unchanged with respect to “frugal utilization of tax money”, whereas 19.33% had positive change and 14.45% had negative change

(a difference of 4.88% between the latter two categories). The mean change was 0.03 ( $p = 0.29$ ), and the standard deviation was 0.67. For “ethical integrity”, 64.65% did not change. There was a difference of 6.83% between those with positive and negative changes (21.09% versus 14.26%). The mean change and standard deviation were 0.08 ( $p = 0.006$ ) and 0.63, respectively. With respect to “credible statements”, 67.06% remained unchanged. Those with positive change (16.57%) exceeded those with negative change (16.37%) by 0.2%. The mean change was 0.01 ( $p = 0.72$ ), and the standard deviation was 0.60.

Table 1. Changes in the six indicators of political trust among Taiwanese students before and after visiting mainland China

	Long-term planning	Putting people's interests first	Correct decision-making	Frugal utilization of tax money	Ethical integrity	Credible statements
-3	0	0	0	0.78	0	0
-2	0.58	0.59	0.39	0.98	0.39	0.19
-1	13.65	12.72	10.35	12.70	13.87	16.18
0	66.86	67.32	68.16	66.21	64.65	67.06
1	18.13	18.20	19.73	18.55	19.92	15.59
2	0.58	1.17	1.37	0.78	1.17	0.97
3	0.19	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	0.05	0.07	0.11	0.03	0.08	0.01
Standard deviation	0.62	0.61	0.60	0.67	0.63	0.60
Sample size	513	511	512	512	512	513

Data source: Wang (2021).

The values for the six aspects of political trust were summed up and the mean value was taken to obtain the indicator of political trust among Taiwanese students

before and after visiting mainland China. The mean value was 2.11 (standard deviation = 0.36) before the program and became 2.17 (0.38) after the program. After the T-test for the mean of paired samples for the two waves of political trust, it was found that the mean value of their political trust had increased significantly by 0.06 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Changes in their political trust were plotted as Figure 1. The mean value was 0.06, and the standard deviation was 0.33. The theoretical value of this change was between -3 and 3, but the actual value was between -1.17 and 1.50. Figure 1 shows that the political trust of 29.31% of the students declined after the exchange program. It became higher and remained unchanged for 42.77% and 27.92% of the respondents, respectively.

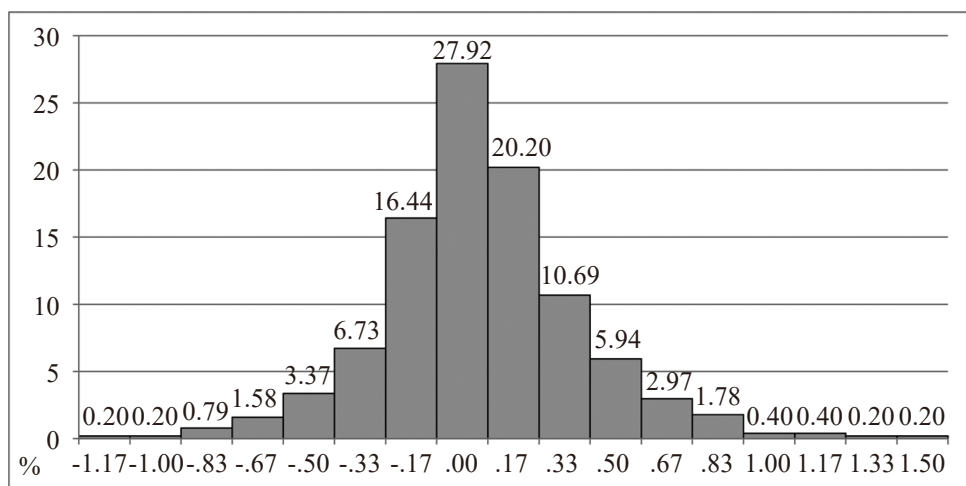


Figure 1. Changes in political trust among Taiwanese students after visiting mainland China

Data source: Prepared by the author.

Data source: Wang (2021).

Note: N = 505.

### *Regression analysis on changes in political trust*

The descriptive statistics of the four independent variables in this study are summarized in Table 2. The absolute value of the skewness coefficient of the variables was less than 3, while that of the kurtosis coefficient was less than 10. These indicate that the data conformed to a normal distribution. For perceived hostility, the mean change and standard deviation were -0.13 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and 0.46, respectively. For satisfaction with democracy, the mean change was -0.01 ( $p = 0.75$ ), and the standard deviation was 0.42. For industrial prospects, the mean change and standard deviation were -0.01 ( $p = .85$ ) and 0.68, respectively. For willingness to go to mainland China for career development, the mean change was 0.01 ( $p = 0.82$ ), and standard deviation was 0.49.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the four independent variables

	Changes in			
	Perceived hostility	Level of satisfaction with democracy	Evaluation of industrial prospects	Willingness to go to mainland China for career development
Mean	-0.13	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Standard deviation	0.46	0.42	0.68	0.49
Minima (Actual/Theoretical values)	-2.00/-3.00	-1.50/-3.00	-3/-3.00	-2.00/-3.00
Maxima (Actual/Theoretical values)	1.50/3.00	1.50/3.00	3/3.00	3.00/3.00
Skewness	-0.37	-0.04	0.20	0.34
Kurtosis	1.27	0.90	2.94	3.69
Positive change (%)	15.55	21.68	16.67	20.27

	Changes in			
	Perceived hostility	Level of satisfaction with democracy	Evaluation of industrial prospects	Willingness to go to mainland China for career development
No change (%)	51.57	56.05	65.89	59.45
Negative change (%)	32.87	22.27	17.44	20.27
Sample size	508	512	516	513

Data source: Wang (2021).

The dependent variable in this study was the political trust score from the second survey wave. As it is a continuous variable, linear regression of the ordinary least squares (OLS) was used to test the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The results are shown in Table 3. The regression model passed the F-test ( $F = 37.86, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that it has explanatory power for the dependent variable. The regression equation explained 41.27% of the variations in the changes in political trust among Taiwanese students after visiting mainland China, and all four hypotheses were empirically supported. Among the four control variables proposed in this study, age, ethnic backgrounds and having prior experience visiting mainland China did not have a significant impact on the dependent variable. However, gender had a significant impact.

Table 3. Factors influencing post-visit political trust among Taiwanese students: an OLS regression model analysis

	B	Standard error	Beta
<b>Changes in:</b>			
* Perceived hostility	-0.12***	0.03	-0.16

	<b>B</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Beta</b>
* Level of satisfaction with democracy	0.13***	0.03	0.14
* Evaluation of industrial prospects	0.07**	0.02	0.12
* Willingness to go to mainland China for career development	-0.07*	0.03	-0.09
<b>Age</b>	-0.10	0.01	-0.05
<b>Gender:</b>			
* Males	0.08**	0.03	0.10
<b>Ethnic backgrounds:</b>			
* Minnan	-0.03	0.03	-0.04
<b>Experience visiting mainland China:</b>			
* Have been	0.02	0.03	0.03
<b>Political trust:</b>			
* Before visiting mainland China	0.68***	0.04	0.66
Constant	0.96***	0.18	
Number of questionnaires		473	
R <sup>2</sup>		0.4239	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>		0.4127	
S.E.E.		0.2898	
F		37.86***	

Data source: Wang (2021).

Notes: \*:  $p < .05$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*:  $p < .001$  (2-tailed test).

### ***Findings and Discussions***

Under the true-acquaintance contact hypothesis of social contact theory, for every 1.0 standard deviation (SD) decrease in the Taiwanese students' perceived

hostility, their trust in Taiwanese officials increases significantly by 0.16 SD ( $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H1 was supported. The CPC's action of inviting Taiwanese youth to visit mainland China and according them a reception that makes them feel at home has the potential to generate effects of true-acquaintance contact, thus reducing their perceived hostility. According to previous research, such a change will make them doubt the accuracy of propaganda by Taiwanese officials, which, in turn, reduces their trust in those officials. However, this study referred to the influence of political mobilization from a cultural perspective, and added a perspective of alertness to the CPC's intention for reunification. This led to the proposal that although true-acquaintance contact can weaken perceived hostility, alertness to any "sugar-coated poison" has a counter-effect that the propaganda by Taiwanese officials is actually correct, resulting in increased trust, instead. This finding does not mean that true-acquaintance contact as advocated by the social contact theory is invalid. Rather, it highlights that the differences between issues must be considered while citing theories, so that explanatory elements are added when appropriate.

Under the political performance hypothesis of political socialization theory, for every 1.0 SD increase in the students' level of satisfaction with democracy, their trust in Taiwanese officials increases significantly by 0.14 SD ( $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H2 was supported. The international community evaluates Taiwan's democracy to be far higher than that of China. However, if the students have not made a comparison personally, it may be difficult for them to detect the gap. Therefore, this study proposed that the political learning of Taiwanese students during their stay in mainland China may deepen their understanding of the gap in democracy and freedom on both sides of the strait, which would make them more satisfied with Taiwan's democratic system. This would eventually increase their trust in Taiwanese officials. However, if their evaluation of Taiwan's democracy before visiting mainland China was excessively high, or if their evaluation of mainland China's democracy was excessively low, their level of satisfaction may be modified after the exchange program, resulting in a reduction in their political trust in Taiwanese officials. This finding



conformed to the institutional performance hypothesis of the institutional perspective, and supported the political learning hypothesis of the political socialization theory.

Under the economic performance hypothesis of political socialization theory, for every 1.0 SD increase in the students' evaluation of Taiwan's industrial prospects, their trust in Taiwanese officials increases significantly by 0.12 SD ( $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, **H3** was supported. China is both the world's largest consumer and a global manufacturing power and continues to serve as the main engine driving global economic growth. Taiwanese students may not fully appreciate China's rapid economic development until they experience it personally. After comparing the economic prospects on both sides of the strait, they may think that Taiwan is not performing as well as China, and this may result in reduced trust in Taiwanese officials. However, if they had overestimated China's economic development and achievements before the exchange program, or underestimated Taiwan's industrial strength, they may become more optimistic about Taiwan's industrial prospects, leading to increased trust in Taiwanese officials. This finding supported the impact of institutional performance and the political learning hypothesis.

Under the self-interest hypothesis of rational choice theory, for every 1.0 SD increase in the students' willingness to go to mainland China for career development, their trust in Taiwanese officials decreases significantly by 0.09 SD ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, **H4** was supported. The CPC has introduced many preferential policies to attract Taiwanese youth to go to mainland China for career development. However, the MAC has pointed out the many risks that the Taiwanese face when they pursue development in mainland China. Students may personally examine these costs and benefits before visiting mainland China, establish their self-interest after calculating their personal material gains and losses, and then determine their willingness to pursue development there. If their willingness increases, it means that they feel that the Taiwanese government cannot provide better benefits for them, so their trust in Taiwanese officials may decrease. In contrast, if their willingness decreases, their

trust in Taiwanese officials may rise. This finding was consistent with the impact of perceived social mobility as advocated by the institutional theory, and supported the self-interest hypothesis of the rational choice theory.

## **Robustness Check**

In the regression model results presented in Table 3, the dependent variable is the political trust index measured using data from the second-wave survey, with the political trust index from the first wave included as a control variable. This approach effectively controls for variations in the respondents' initial levels of political trust. Accounting for these initial levels is crucial, as individuals with high initial trust may show minimal change in the second wave, while those with lower initial trust could exhibit significant increases. In the initial analysis, the four independent variables were designed to capture differences observed between the two survey waves, with the political trust score from the second wave as the dependent variable. For the robustness check, the study shifted to using the change in political trust across the waves as the dependent variable. This adjustment provides deeper insight into how such a change in methodology could influence hypothesis-testing outcomes. Table 4 presents these findings, with Model 1 specifically illustrating the results of this altered dependent variable approach. Additionally, the study introduced an extra layer of analysis by dividing participants into two groups based on their travel experience to mainland China. One group consists of individuals who have previously traveled to mainland China, and the other includes those who have not. This division forms the basis for Model 2, analyzing those without mainland China travel experience, and Model 3, focusing on those with such experience.

If we compare these results with those presented in Table 3, Model 1 in Table 4 shows that all four independent variables significantly influence the dependent variable, demonstrating greater explanatory power, as indicated by the beta values.

While the results of Model 2 reveal that the variable “Willingness to go to mainland China for career development” does not significantly affect the dependent variable, its influence direction is consistent with the hypothesized expectations. Notably, with a p-value of just 0.103, this variable could potentially be associated with significant effects in future studies with larger sample sizes. Furthermore, Model 3 closely aligns with the initial findings, with all four independent variables having a significant impact on the dependent variable. These results collectively reinforce the robustness of the study’s conclusions.

Table 4. OLS regression model of factors influencing changes in political trust among Taiwanese students

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2 (Have not been)</b>	<b>Model 3 (Have been)</b>
	<b>Beta</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>Beta</b>
<b>Changes in:</b>			
* Perceived hostility	-0.20***	-0.25***	-0.15*
* Level of satisfaction with democracy	0.21***	0.16*	0.25***
* Evaluation of industrial prospects	0.18***	0.20**	0.15*
* Willingness to go to mainland China for career development	-0.13**	-0.10	-0.15*
<b>Age</b>	-0.04	-0.03	-0.05
<b>Gender:</b>			
* Males	0.14**	0.14*	0.15*
<b>Ethnic backgrounds:</b>			
* Minnan	-0.09*	-0.11+	-0.07
<b>Experience visiting mainland China:</b>			
* <b>Have been</b>	0.05	-----	-----

	Model 1	Model 2 (Have not been)	Model 3 (Have been)
	Beta	Beta	Beta
Number of questionnaires	473	243	230
R <sup>2</sup>	0.1335	0.1325	0.1454
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.1186	0.1066	0.1184
S.E.E.	0.3130	0.3035	0.3255
F	8.94***	5.13***	5.40***

Data source: Wang (2021).

Notes: +:  $p < .1$ , \*:  $p < .05$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*:  $p < .001$  (2-tailed test).

## Conclusion

Changes in the political trust among Taiwanese students after visiting mainland China symbolize the effectiveness of the CPC's political propaganda, and is critical to the stability of Taiwan's democratic government. This issue deserves close attention from global supporters of democracy. However, no relevant research has been published thus far. The CPC has extended several treatments to Taiwanese people that were previously granted only to Chinese nationals, and has continuously promoted the effectiveness of the Chinese model through interpersonal communication. These actions demonstrate the importance and urgency of addressing the aforementioned issues. To address this gap in research, this study examined 516 Taiwanese youth who visited mainland China during President Tsai Ing-wen's term using a panel survey. The results showed that among the students who visited mainland China, those with greater political trust were 13.46% higher than those with lower trust, with the mean value increasing significantly by 0.06. All four hypotheses were supported empirically.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by combining true-acquaintance contact and political mobilization to propose the perceived hostility hypothesis for changes in political trust. Four hypotheses on changes in political trust were proposed. Among these, the level of satisfaction with democracy, evaluation of industrial prospects, and willingness to go to mainland China for career development were in line with the deductions of the existing literature. However, the results for the perceived hostility hypothesis were beyond the expectations of the social contact theory. Taiwanese students' cross-polity contact led to decreases in perceived hostility, which was in line with the expectations of true-acquaintance contact. Why did this not lead to doubts over propaganda by Taiwanese officials and a reduction in trust? This study referred to the influence of political mobilization and added the perspective of alertness to the CPC's intention for reunification, leading to the proposal that although true-acquaintance contact weakens the degree of perceived hostility, the respondents' alertness to any "sugar-coated poison" counterproved the accuracy of the propaganda by Taiwanese officials, which in turn increased the respondents' trust.

The practical contribution of this study was the discovery that student engagement in cross-polity contact can help increase their political trust in their home country. This is helpful for the Taiwanese government to assess the impacts of cross-strait exchanges. Most of the literature supports the view that cross-polity contact has negative impacts on the subjects' political attitudes toward their home country. Only a few studies have argued that such contact has positive impacts. These were based on interview results using small sample sizes, and there were problems with the methodologies in terms of sample selection. This resulted in the Taiwanese government reducing the number of exchanges with mainland China, in order to minimize the negative impact of the CPC's sharp power. This can be considered a wise decision. Unlike those studies, this study had a large sample size of 516 respondents, and employed a panel survey. Research on Taiwan's elections has long proven that voters with a greater level of political trust are more inclined to support the ruling

party, and are also more satisfied with the president's governance. Therefore, promoting youth exchanges as a means to reduce cross-strait hostility and confrontation will increase trust among Taiwanese students in Taiwanese officials. These officials are also likely to receive the students' support and votes in the future. This can serve as an alternative approach when the Taiwanese government formulates its policies.

The dataset used in this study only extends until the summer of 2019, because of the interference of the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2020 onward, the Chinese government suspended exchange programs for Taiwanese students, a pause that lasted until July 2023. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, contrasting strategies in pandemic response emerged between the governments on both sides of the strait, leading to the "A4 Revolution" among Chinese citizens who opposed the "zero-COVID" policy. Furthermore, the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, to Taiwan triggered a military exercise by the CPC around Taiwan, thus igniting the fourth Taiwan Strait crisis. These two significant events represent substantial shifts in cross-strait relations, potentially altering the baseline of political trust and other political attitudes among Taiwanese students, thereby influencing the trajectory and magnitude of change following their experiences in mainland China. Additionally, such pivotal events or changes in social context may induce a resocialization effect, either mitigating or amplifying the impact of mainland visitation experiences. Consequently, to determine whether the influence of short-term exchanges leaves a lasting imprint or merely constitutes a brief flash in the pan, subsequent third-wave surveys will be instrumental.

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## Appendix

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Appendix 1: Information on the 12 Chinese Culture Study Camps.

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<sup>3</sup> *Journal of Electoral Studies* official website: <http://jestw.nccu.edu.tw>

# 臺生跨政體接觸後的政治信任變遷

王嘉州\*

## 《摘要》

赴陸臺生的政治信任變遷，象徵中共政治宣傳結果成效，攸關臺灣民主政體能否鞏固，值得全球民主支持者密切關注。本文以赴陸參訪之516位臺灣青年為研究對象，結合社會接觸理論，政治社會化理論與理性選擇理論建立四項假設。本研究結果顯示：臺生赴陸交流後的政治信任，變高者比變低者多13.46%，平均數顯著提升0.06，四項假設都獲實證支持。臺生赴陸交流後對中共敵意感知變愈低，或對臺灣民主滿意度變愈高，或對臺灣產業前景評價變愈佳，或赴陸發展意願變愈低，則其臺灣官員信任變愈高。本文結合熟人式接觸與政治動員，提出政治信任變遷的敵意感知假說，對文獻做出了獨特的貢獻。

**關鍵詞：**制度績效、政治學習、政治動員、自評利益、熟人式接觸

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## Appendix 1: Information on the 12 Chinese Culture Study Camps

No.	Exchange Group Name	Time of Visit	Duration (Days)	Number of Students	Number of Valid Questionnaires
1	2016 Summer Beijing Group	July 18 to 26	9	30	22
2	2016 Summer Shanghai Group	August 25 to September 3	10	45	42
3	2016 Summer Shandong Group	August 30 to September 7	9	15	15
4	2017 Winter Beijing Group	January 14 to 22	9	43	39
5	2017 Winter Shanghai Group	February 9 to 17	9	58	50
6	2017 Summer Shanghai Group	August 2 to 10	9	82	77
7	2018 Winter Beijing Group	January 23 to 31	9	43	30
8	2018 Winter Shanghai Group	January 23 to 31	9	42	33
9	2018 Summer Shanghai Group	August 15 to 23	9	81	72
10	2019 Winter Shanghai Group	January 13 to 21	9	42	38
11	2019 Winter Beijing Group	January 15 to 23	9	40	37
12	2019 Summer Shanghai Group	August 18 to 26	9	68	60

Data source: Wang (2021).