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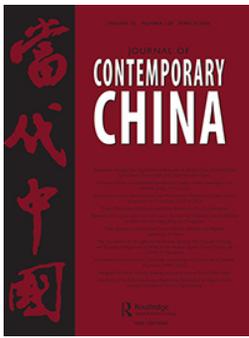
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To cite this article: Ji Ruan, Yuanyuan Lu & Shizhan Ruan (11 Mar 2026): Trust Chains and the Resilience of Patronage Networks :The Use of Indirect *Guanxi* Under Anti-Corruption, Journal of Contemporary China, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2026.2639982](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2026.2639982)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2026.2639982>



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Published online: 11 Mar 2026.



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Trust Chains and the Resilience of Patronage Networks :The Use of Indirect *Guanxi* Under Anti-Corruption

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how anti-corruption campaigns reconfigure patronage networks in China. Ethnographic findings show frequent leadership turnover compels cadres to rely on indirect *guanxi* for protection and promotion. Under pressure, networks consolidate into resilient ‘trust chains’—tightly knit sequences of high-trust dyadic ties reinforced by norms like *renqing* and *yiqi*. These chains are fortified by tactics such as embedding allies in inspection bodies or deploying scapegoats. Consequently, *guanxi* functions less as simple trust and more as ‘trust chain’ that secures benefits. The analysis reveals how cultural and institutional factors mutually reproduce corruption, suggesting that only sustained high-pressure campaigns paired with structural reform can disrupt this cycle.

KEYWORDS

Patronage network; corruption; *guanxi*; trust; promotion

Introduction

The recent anti-corruption campaign in China has had a great impact on rural bureaucracy. However, anti-corruption measures did not significantly lessen corruption at its root in some rural area; rather, the measures increased the need for *guanxi*¹ with Party leaders at local levels for protection and promotion, increasing collusion between officials and businesspeople and elite capture in some rural areas.²

In recent years, there has been high turnover among local officials, particularly top city and county leaders.³ First, many cadres were accused of corruption and forced to step down, and other cadres took their jobs. Second, leaders at the provincial and city level have arbitrary power and thus make arbitrary decisions on personnel, which leads to frequent changes of cadres. Thirdly, the CCP does not allow city or county top leaders to stay in post long enough to develop their stable local

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¹*Guanxi* refers to personal relationships, connections, or networks that can be utilized to acquire social resources or benefits in Chinese societies.

²Daniel Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China* (Cambridge University Press 2019), 69.

³People’s Daily Online, ‘The Dual Adjustment of Party and Government Officials in Jiangyan, Taizhou. The Number of County and District Party Secretaries Born in the 1980s in Jiangsu Has Increased to Three’ (9 September 2023) <<http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2023/0909/c360300-40564260.html>> accessed 20 March 2024; Jingye Li, ‘The “Top Leaders” of the Party and Government in 13 Cities in Jiangsu Province Have Been Fully Adjusted, and the Proportion of “Post-70s” Has Exceeded Half’ (*People’s Daily Online*, 13 July 2023) <<http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2023/0713/c360300-40493280.html>> accessed 20 March 2024; 季乃礼, 张金城 [Ji Naili and Zhang Jincheng], ‘培养式选拔: 干部晋升的一种解释框架’, [‘Cultivation based selection: an explanatory framework for cadre promotion’] [2022] 28(01) 行政论坛 [Administrative Forum] 100–10; 姜兴智 [Jiang, Xingzhi], ‘领导实践中权力活性与监督刚性的法治调和探析’ [‘An analysis of the rule of law harmony between power activity and supervision rigidity in leadership practice’] (2024) 2 领导科学 [Leadership Science] 140–44.

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factions and become corrupt.⁴ Against this backdrop, how can cadres bypass anti-corruption measures and gain promotion?

Previous research has examined President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption measures in the Party and government system from a macro and top-down perspective, but rarely explored how rural corruption networks, especially patronage networks, survived in the face of such anti-corruption crackdown from the perspective of individual rural cadres. Patronage networks are informal hierarchical alliances and networks among persons of unequal political or socio-economic status.⁵ In China, patronage networks exhibit distinct patterns of corruption and resource allocation between rural and urban contexts. Rural patronage systems predominantly operate through informal kinship ties and clan relationships, where resources (e.g. land allocations, subsidies) are distributed via personalized reciprocal relationships. In contrast, urban networks are structured around formal professional affiliations and bureaucratic hierarchies, enabling resource exchanges (e.g. contracts, permits) through instrumental reciprocity. Moreover, rural cadres navigate dual loyalties to both state mandates and local interests, whereas urban power dynamics often manifest as symbiotic corruption, wherein economic elites strategically co-opt state authority for mutual benefit.⁶

While urban patronage networks (or factions) during the Xi era have been extensively studied by scholars, rural patronage networks—particularly those involving county or township-level cadres, and how and why they react to anti-corruption measures—remain under-researched. Against the backdrop of high-pressure anti-corruption campaigns, an in-depth investigation is needed to understand how rural corruption networks adapt to such top-down anti-corruption measures.

Based on an ethnography in a Chinese county, this article examines Chinese corruption from the perspective of patronage networks and *guanxi* to explore how cadres use indirect *guanxi* for promotion and protection and how patronage networks deal with anti-corruption policy, especially the use of the trust mechanism of such patronage networks. This article contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it contributes to the understanding of the changes in Chinese bureaucracy since Xi took power and how rural patronage networks resist top-down high-pressure anti-corruption campaigns. Second, it focuses on indirect *guanxi* and its trust mechanism in patronage networks and how local culture hinder anti-corruption drive, which has been rarely studied. Finally, it shows how the Chinese build interpersonal trust in a 'low-trust society'⁷ and how trust becomes transferable and expands in social networks, contributing to the theory of trust and patronage network.

Corruption and Anti-Corruption in China

Corruption has been a problem throughout China's history. It contributed to the breakup of China's dynastic cycle and continued to haunt Chinese society after the founding of the People's Republic of China.⁸ Today, corruption is endemic at all levels of China's political, economic, and social systems.⁹ Despite China's economic reforms, the state still controls large sectors of the economy, and state agents still largely control access to capital, business licence, and land.¹⁰ The deep involvement of

⁴季乃礼,张金城 [Ji Naili and Zhang Jincheng], (n 3); 姜兴智 [Jiang, Xingzhi], (n 3).

⁵Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (University of California Press 1986); Jean Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government* (University of California Press 1989).

⁶Andrew Walder, (n 5); Jean Oi, (n 5); David Wank, *Commodifying Communism: Business, Trust, and Politics in a Chinese City* (Cambridge University Press 1999).

⁷Francis Fukuyama, *Trust, The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (Hamish Hamilton 1995).

⁸Qiang Fang and Xiaobing Li, *Corruption and Anticorruption in Modern China* (Rowman and Littlefield 2018).

⁹Yianjie Bian, 'Guanxi and the Allocation of Urban Jobs in China' (1994) 140 *The China Quarterly* 971–99; Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Cornell University Press 1994); David Wank, (n 6); John Osburg, 'Making Business Personal: Corruption, Anti-corruption, and Elite Networks in Post-Mao China' (2018) 59 *Current Anthropology* 149–59; Yuen Yuen Ang, *China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption* (Cambridge University Press 2020).

¹⁰Jiangnan Zhu, 'Why are Offices for Sale in China? A Case Study of the Office-selling Chain in Heilongjiang Province' [2008] 48(4) *Asian Survey* 558–79; John Osburg, (n 9); Yuen Yuen Ang, (n 9).

local officials in economic affairs, coupled with unbridled discretionary power, provides opportunities and incentives for corruption.¹¹ State promotion of large infrastructure projects generates illicit income for cadres,¹² and the relationship between cadres and businesspeople has become 'symbiotic clientelism', the exchange of commercial wealth for political power.¹³ For many governmental projects, bidding becomes a procedural facade, while the real winner is determined by under-the-table deals with *guanxi*.¹⁴ The top-down resource allocation system encourages officials from subordinate organizations who want to obtain favourable resource allocations to develop personal ties with upper-level officials.¹⁵ In theory, the CCP is based on 'democratic centralism', but in practice, decisions are usually made in secret.¹⁶ This allows corrupt cadres to distort formal democratic procedures via informal institutions, such as *guanxi* and the buying and selling of positions.¹⁷

Faced with corruption, the CCP resorts to anti-corruption campaigns. The most striking campaign took place in 2012, after Xi became president at the 18th CCP National Congress. It differed from previous campaigns in being of longer duration and greater reach.¹⁸ This campaign significantly reduced opportunities for corruption among bureaucrats and removed many structural obstacles to anti-corruption enforcement, contributing to anti-corruption institutionalization.¹⁹ Between December 2012 and April 2022, discipline inspection and supervision departments nationwide opened 4.388 million cases for examination and investigation, involving 4.709 million corrupt cadres, and also investigated 723,000 cases of violating the spirit of the 'eight-point decision',²⁰ punishing 644,000 Party members.²¹

However, buying and selling of offices still exist in some areas. Cadres need to accumulate sufficient funds to finance their purchases of positions, and they use the power granted by the positions they have bought to squeeze rents from their clients in order to recoup their investments, which further lengthened the corruption chain downward.²² Some argue that the major causes of buying positions are the weaknesses of the Chinese cadre management systems, including the concentration of power over personnel issues and the difficulties of top-down monitoring.²³

The party secretary has the final say over everything, including projects, policies, personnel placement and anti-corruption work,²⁴ and the dual leadership of the local discipline inspection committee remains effectively with party committee leadership.²⁵ The power concentration to party

¹¹Ting Gong, 'Corruption and Local Governance: The Double Identity of Chinese Local Governments in Market Reform' [2006] 19(1) *The Pacific Review* 85–02; Ting Gong and Alfred M. Wu, 'Does Increased Civil Service Pay Deter Corruption? Evidence from China' [2012] 32(2) *Review of Public Personnel Administration* 192–04.

¹²John Osburg, (n 9).

¹³David Wank, (n 6).

¹⁴Jiangnan Zhu, (n 10).

¹⁵Yanjie Bian, 'A Relational Image of Chinese Bureaucracy' [2021] 17(4) *Management and Organization Review* 683–89; Xueguang Zhou, 'Chinese Bureaucracy Through Three Lenses: Weberian, Confucian, and Marchian' [2021] 17(4) *Management and Organization Review* 655–82.

¹⁶Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Brookings Institution Press 2016); Olivia Cheung, *Factional-Ideological Conflicts in Chinese Politics: To the Left or to the Right?* (Amsterdam University Press 2023)

¹⁷Peng Wang, 'Extra-Legal Protection in China: How Guanxi Distorts China's Legal System and Facilitates the Rise of Unlawful Protectors' (2014) 54 *British Journal of Criminology* 809–30; Jiangnan Zhu, 'Corruption in reform Era: A multidisciplinary review' in Weiping Wu and Mark W. Frazier (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Contemporary China* (SAGE Publications Ltd 2018) 302–23.

¹⁸Manion Melanie, 'Taking China's Anticorruption Campaign Seriously' [2016] 4(1) *Economic and Political Studies* 3–18; Qiang Fang and Xiaobing Li (eds.) (n 8).

¹⁹Yong Guo and Songfeng Li, 'Anti-corruption Measures in China: Suggestions for Reforms' [2015] 4(1) *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7–23; Melanie Manion, (n 18).

²⁰The 'eight-point decision on improving Party and government conduct' curbed the hedonism and extravagance of Party officials, banning officials from attending lavish banquets paid for from public funds.

²¹Xinhua News Agency, 'Five Sets of Data with Analysis to Illustrate Anti-corruption in the Past Decade' (30 June 2022) <<http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-06/30/c1128793505.html>> accessed 20 March 2024.

²²Jiangnan Zhu, (n 10); Minxin Pei, *China's Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay* (Harvard University Press 2016).

²³Jiangnan Zhu, (n 10).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵The dual leadership of the generalist party committee at the same level and of the discipline inspection committee one level up, see Manion Melanie, (n 18).

secretary at all levels has been strengthened and become more significant since Xi took power,²⁶ the phenomenon of buying and selling positions still exists due to the arbitrary power of the secretaries, and *guanxi* with party secretaries for protection seem to be more important for cadres.²⁷ The insufficiency of democratic components to monitor centralized power, the complex hierarchical structure, and the prevalence of informal politics in China have collectively led to the intensification of corruption and the difficulty of anti-corruption effort.²⁸ Since anyone can be found guilty of corruption in a context of rule of man in some rural area, people seek the protection of a high-ranking official (patron), which exacerbates the use of *guanxi* and patronage networks.²⁹

Patronage Networks and Trust in

Social networks frequently facilitate corruption in China, with strong local patronage and other informal networks hampering anti-corruption measures.³⁰ Chinese bureaucracy features a personalistic authority structure governed by human relationships³¹ and patron–client relationships can shape cadres’ careers.³² Some scholars focus on how patronage networks mould China’s bureaucratic system and how these networks influence public officials’ distribution of state resources intended to support economic growth and the development of corruption patronage networks.³³

‘Patronage’ and ‘patron–client relationships’ can be defined as informal hierarchical alliances between persons of unequal political or socio-economic status in which patrons (individuals of higher status) provide state or collectively owned resources, protection, or other benefits to clients (individuals of lower status), who reciprocate by sharing illicit benefits and offering loyalty, services and support to their patrons.³⁴ Patronage networks are social networks based on such patron–client relationships which is a process of alliance formation shaped by an underlying social network structure.³⁵ Patronage networks exist universally across nations and cultures. In the Chinese context, such patronage networks are mostly vertical *guanxi* networks.

In some circumstances, patronage networks in China increase the efficiency of the bureaucratic system, contribute to the development of the economy,³⁶ and become an alternative institution for

²⁶Sangkuk Lee, ‘An Institutional Analysis of Xi Jinping’s Centralization of Power’ [2017] 26(105) *Journal of Contemporary China* 325–36; Jérôme Doyon and Franziska Barbara Keller, ‘Knowing the Wrong Cadre? Networks and Promotions in the Chinese Party-state’ [2020] 68(4) *Political Studies* 1036–53; Wenhui Yang, ‘Power Concentration and Bottom up Information Flow: Evidence From Chinese Municipal Congresses’ [2024] 37(1) *Governance* 221–39.

²⁷Doyon and Keller, (n 26).

²⁸Xuezhi Guo, ‘Controlling Corruption in the Party: China’s Central Discipline Inspection Commission’ (2014) 219 *The China Quarterly* 597–24; Yong Guo and Li Songfeng, (n 19); Qiang Fang and Xiaobing Li (n 8); Jiangnan Zhu, (n 17) 311; Jiangnan Zhu and Yiping Wu, ‘Lessons from China: Fighting Corruption in the Construction Sector’ in Yahong Zhang and Cecilia Lavena, *Government Anti-Corruption Strategies: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (CRC Press 2015) 74.

²⁹Ben Hillman, *Patronage and Power: Local State Networks and Party-State Resilience in Rural China* (Stanford University Press 2014); John Osburg, (n 9); Jiangnan Zhu, (n 10).

³⁰Ben Hillman, (n 29).

³¹Andrew Walder, (n 5); Jean Oi, (n 5); Lucian Pye, ‘Factions and the Politics of *Guanxi*: Paradoxes in Chinese Administrative and Political Behaviour’ (1995) 34 *The China Journal* 35–53.

³²Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph and Mingxing Liu, ‘Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China’ [2012] 106 (01) *American Political Science Review* 166–87; Sonja Opper, Victor Nee and Stefan Brehm, ‘Homophily in the Career Mobility of China’s Political Elite’ (2015) 54 *Social Science Research* 332–52; Jean Oi, (n 5).

³³Jing Vivian Zhan, ‘Filling the Gap of Formal Institutions: The Effects of *Guanxi* Network on Corruption in Reform-era China’ [2012] 58(2) *Crime, Law and Social Change* 93–109; Wooyeal Paik and Richard Baum, ‘Clientelism with Chinese Characteristics: Local Patronage Networks in Post-reform China’ [2014] 129(4) *Political Science Quarterly* 675–01; Junyan Jiang, ‘Making Bureaucracy Work: Patronage Networks, Performance Incentives, and Economic Development in China’ [2018] 62(4) *American Journal of Political Science* 982–99; Ben Hillman, (n 29); Peng Wang and Xia Yan, ‘Bureaucratic Slack in China: The Anti-corruption Campaign and the Decline of Patronage Networks in Developing Local Economies’ (2020) 243 *The China Quarterly* 611–34.

³⁴Andrew Walder, (n 5); Jean Oi, (n 5); David Wank, (n 6).

³⁵Franziska Keller, ‘Moving Beyond Factions: Using Social Network Analysis to Uncover Patronage Networks Among Chinese Elites’ [2016] 16(1) *Journal of East Asian Studies* 17–41.

³⁶Junyan Jiang, (n 33); Peng Wang and Xia Yan, (n 33).

organizing governmental affairs.³⁷ However, patronage networks facilitate corruption and harm formal institutions.³⁸ Officials use land as patronage to build their clientelistic networks and share power among themselves,³⁹ and provincial leaders allocate significantly more transfers to localities governed by officials who are part of their networks.⁴⁰

Patronage by high-level politicians greatly enhanced officials' chances of promotion. Research has found that being connected to the province's top leader, the party secretary, is beneficial to one's promotion.⁴¹ However, patrons' exits from the political elite had a significantly negative impact on a clients' chance of promotion.⁴² City-level officials having patron–client ties with incumbent provincial leaders tend to have faster economic growth because the informal connections foster mutual trust and help solve the principal–agent problems.⁴³ This can also explain why local officials who join strong patronage networks are more likely to be promoted since they can win in the 'promotion tournament', in which local officials generating better economic performance than their peers or predecessors can be awarded with promotions.

Party and government leaders at prefectural (city municipal) level, especially members of the Prefectural Communist Party Standing Committee, play an important role in the appointment and promotion of county leaders and heads of city bureaus. Similarly, county leaders play an important role in the promotion of town leaders and heads of county bureaus.⁴⁴ However, since power has been concentrated in top leaders at each level since Xi took power, city and county Party secretaries play a more important role in cadres' promotions.⁴⁵

The volatility of Chinese politics encouraged cadres to count on *guanxi* to get things done and promoted a culture of mutual dependence and moral obligation among cadres.⁴⁶ *Guanxi* provides secret, exclusive, and safe channels of communication for officials to disclose crucial information in exchange for benefits; it enables corrupt exchanges when state intervention and underdeveloped markets prevent open and fair distribution of resources; it also encourages particularism, making officials feel obliged and justified to engage in corrupt activities.⁴⁷

In China, the culture of *guanxi* makes patronage networks cohesive and reduces transaction costs. *Guanxi* refers to personal relationships, connections or networks based in Chinese culture, which can be utilized, or potentially utilized, in informal and interpersonal forms, for the acquisition of resources.⁴⁸ *Guanxi* is rooted in some traditional Chinese culture or concepts, such as *renqing*, *ganqing* (affection), *mianzi* (social face) and *yiqi* (personal loyalty and obligation). *Guanxi*'s exchange-facilitating roles are based on *renqing* (人情).⁴⁹ Although *renqing* has many connotations, such as favours or indebtedness, it mainly refers to a traditional Chinese social norm that emphasizes

³⁷Ben Hillman, (n 29).

³⁸Andrew Nathan, 'A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics' (1973) 53 *The China Quarterly* 42; Andrew Nathan and Kellee S. Tsai, 'Factionalism: A New Institutionist Restatement' (1995) 34 *China Journal* 171; Wooyeal Paik and Richard Baum, (n 33); Jing Vivian Zhan, (n 33).

³⁹Xin Sun, 'Power Sharing, Patronage, and Land Institutions in China' [2019] 66(5) *Problems of Post-Communism* 315–28.

⁴⁰Junyan Jiang and Muyang Zhang, 'Friends with Benefits: Patronage Networks and Distributive Politics in China' (2020) 184 *Journal of Public Economics* 104–43.

⁴¹Doyon and Keller, (n 26).

⁴²Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph and Mingxing Liu, 'Getting ahead in the Communist Party: explaining the advancement of Central Committee members in China' [2012] 106 (01) *American Political Science Review* 166–87.

⁴³Jiangnan Zhu, (n 17).

⁴⁴冯军旗[Feng, Junqi], '中县干部' ['Cadre in Central County'] (PhD diss, Peking University 2010); Ben Hillman, (n 29).

⁴⁵Sangkuk Lee, (n 26); Doyon and Keller, (n 26); Wenhui Yang, (n 26).

⁴⁶Xuezhai Guo, 'Dimensions of *Guanxi* in Chinese Elite Politics' (2001) 46 *The China Journal* 69–0.

⁴⁷Jing Vivian Zhan, (n 33).

⁴⁸Bruce Jacobs, 'A Preliminary Model of Particularistic Ties in Chinese Political Alliances: *KanCh'ing* and *Kuanhsi* in a Rural Taiwanese Township' (1979) 78 *China Quarterly* 237–73; Ambrose King, 'Kuan-hsi and Network Building: A Sociological Interpretation' (1991) 1202 *Daedalus* 63–4; Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Duke University Press 1997); Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, (n 9)

⁴⁹Kwang-Kuo Hwang, 'Face and favor: the Chinese Power Game' [1987] 92(4) *American Journal of Sociology* 944–74; Yun xiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford University Press 1996); Ling Li, 'Performing bribery in China: *guanxi*-practice, corruption with a human face' (2011) 20 *Journal of Contemporary China* 1–20; Jack Barbalet, '*Guanxi* as social exchange' [2018] 52(5) *Sociology* 934–49.

emotional concern, symmetrical reciprocity, obligation, and indebtedness.⁵⁰ Inside patronage networks, patrons treat members of the network differently according to how close their *guanxi* is to the patrons because the Chinese have differential criteria of morality and so-called *chaxugeju*, the 'differential mode of association' as Fei Xiaotong argued.⁵¹

Guanxi is based on trust, and trust is generated through *guanxi* exchanges.⁵² 'Since there is no way to assure an appropriate return for a favour, social exchange requires trusting others to discharge their obligations'.⁵³ Interpersonal trust is different from trust in institutions, social trust, system trust, or so-called 'trust in abstract systems'.⁵⁴ Trust in *guanxi* is usually regarded as interpersonal and particularistic.⁵⁵ In a 'low trust society' like China,⁵⁶ where 'generalised trust' is low, people practice *guanxi* in order to trust more people in a wider network.

Some argue that this trust is mostly network assurance, because gossiping influences *guanxi* members' reputation negatively and they are afraid of being excluded, so they act in a way designed to inspire trust.⁵⁷ In fact, trust is different from assurance. Trust is based on the inference of the interaction between partners' personal traits and intentions, whereas assurance is based on the knowledge of the 'incentive structure surrounding the relationship'.⁵⁸ In this article, however, 'trust in *guanxi*' is defined as 'behavioural trust': if one can act with trust, this trusting behaviour should be considered as trust in *guanxi*. People who act in trust have at least two main reasons to do so: they trust each other psychologically, or they recognise that network assurance exists although they do not really trust each other in their minds. Trust in *guanxi* can be one or both of these. Within *guanxi* networks, individuals scrutinize others' daily ritual interactions to assess adherence to *renqing* rules. Compliance fosters trustworthiness, while non-compliance undermines it. This mechanism is termed 'trust produced by ritual' or 'ritual trust', distinct from trust grounded in Confucian virtue ('virtue trust').⁵⁹

In general, people who use indirect ties are more likely to get better resources than those who only use direct ties.⁶⁰ However, scholarly attention has been remarkably scant regarding trust in indirect *guanxi* utilization. Two distinct patterns characterize the indirect application of *guanxi* networks. In the primary pattern, individual A, who trusts B and asks B for a favour, then B turns to C for the favour. Should C prove unable to fulfill the request, the chain extends to D, thereby forming a trust linkage among A, B, C and D. In this situation, A and C/D do not know each other. The secondary pattern diverges when A petitions B for assistance, B facilitates an introduction between A and C while maintaining an intermediary role. Here, the preexisting relationship between B and C serves as the motivational catalyst for C's assistance. If C cannot provide the required help, the network may further expand to include D through mutual introductions among ABCD, again forming an ABCD trust chain.

Jack Barbalet posits that *guanxi* networks emerge from cultivated obligations rather than latent structural connections. His illustrative case demonstrates: '... Wang got a job for Zhao through her contact with an employer, call him Chen, means that Wang and Chen have *guanxi* obligations, but

⁵⁰Kwang-Kuo Hwang, (n 49); Jack Barbalet, (n 49); Yunxiang Yan, (n 49) 4.

⁵¹Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil, the Foundation of Chinese Society* (University of California Press 1992).

⁵²Alan Smart, 'Gift, bribes and *guanxi*: a reconsideration of Bourdieu's social capital' (1993) 8 *Cultural Anthropology* 400.

⁵³Peter Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (Wiley 1964).

⁵⁴Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford University Press 1990) 83–8.

⁵⁵Cheng-shu Kao, 'Personal trust' in the large businesses in Taiwan: a traditional foundation for contemporary economic activities' in Gary G Hamilton (ed.) (1996) *Asian Business Networks* 61–0.

⁵⁶Francis Fukuyama, (n 7).

⁵⁷Jack Barbalet, 'The Structure of *Guanxi*: Resolving Problems of Network Assurance' [2014] 43(1) *Theory and Society* 51–9.

⁵⁸Toshio Yamagishi and Midori Yamagishi, 'Trust and commitment in the United States and Japan' [1994] 18(2) *Motivation and Emotion* 132.

⁵⁹Ji Ruan, *Guanxi, Social Capital and School Choice in China: The Rise of Ritual Capital* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017) 153–65.

⁶⁰Yianjie Bian, 'Bringing Strong Ties Back in: Indirect Ties, Network Bridges, and Job Searches in China' (1997) 62 *American Sociological Review* 366–85; Zhangbo Yang and Yanjie Bian, 'Bring indirect Ties Back: the Indirect Ties Effect on Initial Wage Income' (2016) 12 *Social Science Point* 165–75.

Jack Barbalet, '*Guanxi*, tie strength, and network attributes' [2015] 59 (8) *American Behavioral Scientist* 1038–050.

not Zhao and Chen'. Zhao has an obligation to Wang, and Wang has an obligation to Chen, but it does not follow that Zhao has an obligation to Chen'. This exemplifies the first trust chain pattern mentioned above. However, this analysis overlooks the second pattern's dynamics. Should Wang introduce Zhao to Chen, leading to Chen offering Zhao the position, then Zhao becomes directly obligated to Chen. Their subsequent face-to-face interactions, governed by *renqing* norms, foster 'ritual trust', which is absent in the first pattern. Crucially, Wang's intermediary role provides a robust network assurance—a dimension insufficient in the first pattern.

The first pattern's limitation lies in the favor seeker's inability to directly engage with the ultimate benefactor, potentially weakening trust and motivation as intermediary links multiply. Conversely, the second pattern enables multiple influencers to approach the donor. For instance, when three individuals (A, B, and C) collectively petition D for assistance, D's decision to help creates reciprocal obligations from all three. This multilateral indebtedness, coupled with heightened reciprocity expectations, significantly strengthens D's motivation and network assurance to assist. Moreover, this face-to-face indirect *guanxi* interaction creates valuable opportunities for cultivating 'ritual trust' among all participants. Therefore, under high-pressure anti-corruption, corrupt cadres are more likely to use the second pattern for exchange since it is more secure.

Methodology and Changes in the Research Site

The main data presented here is derived from an ethnographic study conducted in a county in southern China (County X, located in City X) from March 2017 to October 2019 with post-fieldwork in early 2022 and at the end of 2023. County X consists of 17 towns with a permanent population of 1.78 million and an area of 1380 square kilometres. Some of the towns are rich and industrial, and some are poor, with only traditional agriculture. County X is selected due to its serious corruption reported by CCP's official media and its strong traditional culture with a long history.⁶¹

In March 2017, the lead author travelled to County X with several professors to research the topic of 'culture and governance' assigned by the author's university, and the author got to know many cadres in this county. Since few people would admit to *guanxi* practice publicly, building *guanxi* with informants beforehand was necessary.⁶² The research design did not randomly select informants but categorized them according to the research design to minimize selection bias.

The author is fluent in the local language and demonstrates a deep understanding of regional culture, facilitating rapport with informants. To establish credibility, the author presented a formal introduction letter from his university—a gesture that resonated with many cadres who were alumni of the same institution. This shared affiliation led them to regard the author as a mentor, fostering a relationship grounded in respect. Leveraging this trust, along with pre-existing connections through old friends and relatives, the author expanded his network via home visits, gift exchanges, and participation in informal banquets. His familiarity with *renqing* norms and ability to navigate local social etiquette allowed him to cultivate ritual trust with local cadres.

The data was gathered through participant observation, interviews, and documentation. The author usually interviewed cadres in relaxed settings, over tea, dinner, or drinks. The author did not mention *guanxi* directly but started with the topic of promotion. The interviewee would usually take the initiative and mention terms such as '*guanxi*' or 'backing'. They might mention that a certain person they knew had backing and *guanxi*, so that person got promoted. Data triangulation and corroboration are essential during data analysis.⁶³ For instance, it is necessary to corroborate interview material with observations and the opinions of other relevant interviewees.

⁶¹The county's serious corruption reported by media does not imply that the county is under unusually intense and sustained public scrutiny. Rather, it serves as an indication that the CCP is actively addressing corruption in the county since China's mainstream media operates as the voice of the Party.

⁶²Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, 'The resilience of *guanxi* and its new deployments: a critique of some new *guanxi* scholarship' (2002) 170 *The China Quarterly* 459–76.

⁶³Uwe Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research* (3rd edn, Sage 2006).

Thirty-four people in County X were interviewed on the topic of promotion, including cadres, businesspeople, and nine officials from county-level government and departments, some of whom were later promoted to city-level officials, while some were punished and were sent to jail or downgraded. In addition, there were six town-level cadres from five towns, six village-level cadres from five villages, five businesspeople, three teachers, and five ordinary villagers. The author visited different places, such as government offices, canteens, and the homes of officials, and observed many activities, such as secret banquets, elections, and government meetings.

All participants were informed of the research aims and content and were highly supportive. In order to preserve confidentiality, certain contextual information is not revealed in this article; likewise, all individuals, cities, and places were coded anonymously. Nevertheless, significant ethical concerns have persistently troubled the researcher. A fundamental dilemma arises between the imperative to gather authentic data for scientific inquiry and the moral obligation to report observed misconduct among research subjects. Leveraging personal relationships for academic purposes while potentially compromising those relationships proved ethically untenable for the researcher. The sole recourse has been rigorous protection of informants' identities. Notably, these individuals remain vulnerable within the prevailing high-pressure political environment, irrespective of the researcher's investigative actions.

County X's bureaucracy was strongly affected by the anti-corruption policies, which led to the dismissal, resignation, or sentencing of many cadres. However, our ethnographic study found that buying and selling positions still occurs. Before paying money to leaders, they have to seek and practice *guanxi* with them. Although some cadres claimed that paying for positions was illegal and they would not do that, they revealed that many others did. Some cadres frankly admitted they had paid a lot of money for a promotion. Whether a cadre engages in bribery or not, establishing *guanxi* is a prerequisite for promotion, as it serves as a foundation of trust. Ethnographic data shows that using *guanxi* to control the bidding of government projects, which involves huge kickbacks, remained popular in County X despite the anti-corruption campaign. *Guanxi* and bribery still dominated cadres' promotions but in a more covert compared to before Xi took power.⁶⁴ Moreover, due to power centralization since 2012, *guanxi* with those local top leaders becomes more important for cadres seeking promotion and protection in County X.

Since 2012, the CCP has implemented numerous anti-corruption policies, such as the 'eight-point decision on improving Party and government conduct', which was designed to curb the extravagance of Party officials. However, cadres in County X did not stop their lavish banqueting; they simply switched from upscale hotels or restaurants to secret locations. For example, they dine in an apartment near an upscale restaurant, as some high-end restaurants rent nearby apartments in order to continue to operate banquets. Cadres also go to unlicensed restaurants that open directly into the living blocks rather than the main street, which only accept reservations from regular customers. The most popular banquet venues are located in privately owned factories or places of business. These banqueting halls are usually luxuriously decorated, and top chefs are invited to cook. Alternatively, cadres go to a manor or beautiful villa in the countryside with private leisure facilities such as fishing or golf, where the owner provides an opulent hidden banquet hall.

Before Xi, top leaders of City X and County X were usually appointed for five-year terms, and some remained the position for a few terms and recruited dozens of loyal subordinates, becoming a stable faction. However, in the Xi era, local officials are frequently changed, partly to prevent corruption. Since 2013, each county committee secretary in County X has had an average term of only two years, and as these secretaries are often outsiders it is difficult for them to form a stable faction.

In County X, both formal and informal factors can influence the promotion of local officials, but informal institutions such as *guanxi*, *renqing* and patronage play a foundational role in cadres' promotion. After leaders have made their secret promotion decisions, they conduct a public democratic voting process, known as 'going through the procedure', which is merely a formality.

⁶⁴Pre-Xi', 'before Xi' or 'before 2012' in this article refers to the era when China was ruled by Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin.

In March 2017, at the Education Bureau of County X, the leading author observed a democratic election campaign. During the competitive election, two young section members running for section chief delivered speeches to the entire department in a large meeting hall. One candidate said: 'I came here today to campaign with a special mission, which everyone knows'. What he meant was, 'I am a helper. You guys don't need to vote for me; you should choose another person'. The audience laughed. One of the leaders (from the county organization department) sitting in the first row yelled at the speaker, 'Be serious! No joking!' Cadres told the author that everyone knew the election was merely a formality, that the decision had been made by leaders before the election, and that promotion requires establishing *guanxi* with leaders beforehand.⁶⁵ In 2018, County X cancelled these election speeches. Now colleagues one by one separately talk to a working group from the organization department and recommend a candidate. After this, a voting process is carried out, but this is just another formality, because leaders tell everyone privately in advance that they should vote for a certain person.

Indirect : A Popular Way to Seek Promotion and Protection

As the county secretary will be replaced every couple of years, cadres do not have enough time to build a close direct *guanxi* with them. Instead, cadres turn to indirect *guanxi*. Before 2012, indirect *guanxi* for promotion was also common, though less prevalent than during the Xi era. Many cadres could leverage direct *guanxi* with a county secretary to gain promotion before 2012, joining the secretary's patronage network and forming an 'independent kingdom'.⁶⁶

Buying and selling positions needs the trust and assurance *guanxi* provides, and using indirect ties is an effective *guanxi* practice. Moreover, most cadres in the county bureaucracy know who each other's backing is. They gossip about who belongs to whom, who is a person of this or that leader. Cadres recognize the boundaries of patronage networks, enabling them to assess whom and how to trust. They exhibit greater trust toward members within their own network, perceiving them as 'one of us' and recognizing the robust assurances inherent to these networks.

Before 2012, cadres employed *guanxi* more overtly than in the current era. Some officials even delivered cash payments directly to the county secretary's office under the pretext of submitting documents, explicitly seeking promotions. Today, such exchanges are confined to camera-blind spots in secluded locations like underground parking garages. Similarly, while cadres previously entertained secretaries openly in high-end restaurants, they now resort to clandestine venues as mentioned earlier. Moreover, before 2012, cadres could gain promotion by using *guanxi* with one of the Standing Committee members who could influence the decision in a meeting of promotion, but in Xi era, due to power centralization, the Standing Committees have less power in deciding cadres' promotion. Consequently, many cadres now rely exclusively on indirect *guanxi* connections to the county secretary. The anti-corruption campaign has compressed patronage networks into smaller, tighter structures. Power centralization forces cadres to rely on indirect connections with the county secretary.

Before 2012, many cadres used the first pattern of indirect *guanxi* (as mentioned earlier) for promotion, but after 2012, cadres are more likely to use the second pattern of indirect *guanxi* since the second pattern is more secure.⁶⁷ Competition for benefits among different patronage networks happens frequently, especially when members of different patronage networks compete for promotion, and most of them use the second pattern of indirect *guanxi*. For example, in 2018, the organization department of County X was going to choose a cadre as head of Town A. Wang, 38, had a high level of knowledge and education, good working practices, and strong professional skills.

⁶⁵ Observation at the education bureau of County X, October 2017; interview with department cadres Hong, male, 56, head of County X education bureau and Hou, male, 45, county education bureau section chief, May 2018 and October 2019.

⁶⁶ Ben Hillman, (n 29).

⁶⁷ For most rural cadres, direct *guanxi* with the county secretary are too weak, and trust of the first pattern of indirect *guanxi* are not strong enough.

Nevertheless, another cadre, Qian, 45, whose educational background and abilities were clearly inferior to Wang's, received the promotion.

The author learned from multiple sources that Qian had contacted the county secretary through his *guanxi* with a rich businessman who had long-term *guanxi* with the secretary. He visited the secretary many times, giving gifts, and chatting. After good communication, Qian finally gave a bribe to the secretary for his promotion (local people also call bribe '*renqing*'). Wang, on the other hand, was close to the deputy county head, Huang,⁶⁸ who led Wang to the county secretary's home and attempted to give him a bribe for the promotion. However, the secretary refused the bribe, since the secretary who originally worked in the other county was newly appointed and was not close to Huang, although Huang trusted Wang.⁶⁹ The trust chain connecting Wang, Huang and the secretary was not successfully built, which meant it was not safe for the secretary to take a bribe from Wang.⁷⁰ This is also related to Fei's *chaxugeju* that the one closer to the leader will have the advantage, since the closer, the bigger the obligation to offer help and the more trust and assurance there is when taking bribes.⁷¹

Personal Loyalty in the Trust Chain

In County X, indirect *guanxi* is used to build a trust chain, or trust–loyalty chain, in which A is loyal to B, B is loyal to C, and C is loyal to D. Similarly, D trusts C, C trusts B, and B trusts A, the favour-seeker or briber. A trust chain is formed only when each set of dyadic trust relationships is strong enough and the intermediaries are all willing to link *guanxi* to other people.⁷²

In *guanxi* exchanges, trust is based on familiarity and personal loyalty.⁷³ Since the Chinese are more loyal to individuals than to a system, loyalty to an individual with *guanxi* is stronger than commitment to an organization.⁷⁴ Indeed, 'in determining the promotion of Chinese government officials, personal loyalty to patrons is more important than impersonal loyalty to the communist party-state'.⁷⁵ Many people in China still believe that good *guanxi* and personal loyalty to the leader of their department or organization will benefit their careers.⁷⁶

The most effective way to demonstrate one's loyalty is to obey a supervisor's instructions, even in the face of danger. Cadres who make sacrifices to safeguard their *guanxi* leader are considered to possess the significant virtue of *yiqi* (loyalty and obligation), a trait that many commend. The author was told by multiple sources that cadres highly appreciate this sort of loyalty. Before an individual can demonstrate loyalty by making significant sacrifices for their *guanxi* leader, daily ritualized practices serve this purpose. These include acts like bowing, or attentively serving food and drink to the leader during banquets. This constitutes a form of ritual-based trust.

The trust chain encompasses not only trust between two adjacent nodes; there is also a certain degree of trust between non-adjacent nodes when the nodes realize they are in the same chain. For example, D knows that C is loyal to him (C is D's person). When D knows B is loyal to C (B is C's person), D can trust B. Similarly, D also has some trust in A. That is to say, when D sees personal loyalty between A and B and also personal loyalty between B and C, D can trust A to a certain extent,

⁶⁸Deputy county heads and local rich businessmen are usually patrons in local patronage networks.

⁶⁹Observation in Town A, May 2018; interviews with Huan, male, 57, deputy head of County X; Jiang, male, 39, office director of Town A; Wang M, 38, former deputy head of Town A; Qian, male, 45, head of Town A, May 2018 and October 2018.

⁷⁰The secretary was arrested in 2024 for taking bribes, including sexual bribes.

⁷¹It is also related to how much benefit the secretary will have and the power influence. If Wang asked a higher official to talk to the county secretary, the result would have been different.

⁷²Dyadic or bilateral trust is trust between two people, see Jack Barbalet, (n 57).

⁷³Xiaotong Fei, (n 51).

⁷⁴Gordon Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (Walter de Gruyter 1990).

⁷⁵Peng Wang and Xia Yan, (n 33) 1290.

⁷⁶Yijun Xing, Yipeng Liu and Shlomo Tarba, 'A cultural inquiry into ambidexterity in supervisor—subordinate relationship' [2020] 31(2) *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 203–31.

even though D is not familiar with A. This trust without face-to-face familiarity is based on the actor's knowledge of other people's personal loyalty.

Gao, deputy secretary (third-in-command) of Town B, gained his position in 2017 through *guanxi* with Liao, the deputy city mayor, via Gao's businessman cousin, Deng. Deng has had a long-term friendship with Liao; he often visits Liao's home, bringing expensive gifts, and thus gains many chances to do business with the government. Liao and the county secretary are good friends with a high level of trust. Deng visited Liao's home and gave him an envelope of cash on behalf of Gao to ask for the favour of Gao's promotion. Through Liao's introduction by a phone call, Deng and Gao visited the county secretary's home and gave him an envelope with cash, and later, Gao gained a promotion. After that, Gao and Deng frequently visited the county secretary to offer gifts, a flattering ritual that showed loyalty. This created a trust chain in which D (county secretary) trusts C (deputy city mayor Liao), C trusts B (cousin Deng), and B trusts A (Gao).⁷⁷

In 2018, Liao, the deputy mayor, happened to visit Town B, and met Gao for the first time. He knew Gao was Deng's man, and he once received a bribe from Deng on behalf of Gao. He smiled and told the public at a meeting that Gao had done a good job and he hoped all cadres and people in Town A would support him.⁷⁸ In this trust chain, C knows that B is loyal (B is C's person) and A is loyal to B (A is B's person), so C develops a certain trust in A even though C is not familiar with A. Personal loyalty can be transferred from person to person via indirect *guanxi*, forming a trust chain, or trust-loyalty chain, as the case of Gao demonstrates.

In our post-field work in 2023, Gao, who was just promoted to head of a county government department, said: 'Nowadays, promotion is all about luck. If a relative or close friend happens to have close *guanxi* with the new city secretary I'll get promoted'. He has been accumulating *guanxi* and money for his next promotion, and indirect *guanxi* is always his main method.⁷⁹

Enhances the Role of the Trust Chain

The officialdom of a county is an 'acquaintance circle' in which social rules, mostly local *renqing* ethics, guide behaviour. Many have argued that *guanxi*'s corruption-facilitation is based on *renqing*.⁸⁰ The *renqing* ethics of officials in County X state that one should visit leaders' homes with gifts to show respect and loyalty; one should return favours, or give gifts, including cash, to benefactors; one should make every effort to help friends with *yiqi*; and one should be loyal to *guanxi* network leaders (patrons) and should not betray those leaders. Betrayal includes the following two different patrons that have fierce competition or are struggling with each other.

Renqing ethics provide third-party scrutiny; this acts as an assurance mechanism for *guanxi* practice and ensures trust. Scrutiny is often performed by mutual friends and the acquaintance circle, providing network assurance and encouraging trusting behaviour.⁸¹ In a county bureaucracy, almost everyone knows everyone else, so the word-of-mouth-based enforcement mechanism works effectively. Such gossiping based on *renqing* ethic can affect a cadre's chance of promotion, because superiors may use information received through *guanxi* networks to evaluate their subordinates.⁸² Therefore, such third-party intervention indicates 'the triadic rather than dyadic structure of *guanxi* relationships when sanction of reputation is included'.⁸³

⁷⁷Observation and interview with Deng, male, 50, businessman, October 2019; Gao, male, 47, deputy secretary of Town B, October 2019.

⁷⁸Interview with Deng, October 2019.

⁷⁹However, Liao stepped down in 2023 and Gao stepped down in 2025 due to corruption. Deng were arrested in 2025 for bribing officials.

⁸⁰Ling Li, (n 49); Jing Vivian Zhan, (n 33); Xuezi Guo, 'Controlling corruption in the Party' (n 28); Peng Wang and Jingyi Wang, 'How China promotes its military officers: interactions between formal and informal institutions' (2018) 234 *The China Quarterly* 399–19.

⁸¹Jack Barbalet, (n 57).

⁸²Peng Wang and Jingyi Wang, (n 80).

⁸³Jack Barbalet, (n 57).

In 2019, Shen, Party secretary of Town C, was promoted to deputy county head. Many of his friends and colleagues said that Shen achieved promotion through his *guanxi* with higher-level officials, particularly Tian, the head of the organization department of the municipal Party committee, who was from the same town as Shen. Shen was loyal to Tian and had been promoted again and again with Tian's help.

Moreover, Shen had a good reputation for *yiqi* (loyalty and obligation) and was *renqing lianda* (good at *renqing*), which earned him the affection of many cadres in County X. Shen always gave gifts to friends, gives 'luck' money to leaders, helped his friends by doing his utmost, visited leaders' homes to show respect, and was always very helpful to his friends. After his promotion to deputy head, he held lavish banquets to thank everyone who helped him during the promotion process.

At a banquet attended by Niu, the deputy head of the county organization department, Shen took Niu to a corner of the banquet hall and gave him an envelope, probably filled with cash (local people call this *renqing*). They returned to the banquet table, where Niu toasted Shen and said, 'My good brother, you have never forgotten old friends'. Then he said to the other attendees, 'Brother Shen has a lot of *yiqi*; he is now our leader, but he has never forgotten us or our friendship'.⁸⁴ A deputy head of a county has a higher position than a deputy head of a department in the county. Since Niu assisted Shen with some written materials to support his promotion during the promotion process, Shen treated him to a lavish banquet and gave him a cash gift (to return the *renqing*), even though Shen now occupies a higher position. Niu was moved by this gesture, as it was common practice for subordinates to invite supervisors to dinner and give them cash gifts for protection. Shen did the opposite because he has *yiqi* and treats friends very nicely.

In order to illustrate Shen's *yiqi*, some cadres in County X told the author that Shen secretly assigned some people to take care of a friend, Xiao who was a member of Tian's patronage network; Xiao was imprisoned for corruption but lived like a king with nice conditions there. Shen's sense of *renqing* and *yiqi* earned him a good reputation within the acquaintance circle. Some higher-level leaders may not know Shen very well, but they can trust him to a certain extent and are happy to build *guanxi* with him and give him promotion since they know his reputation for good *renqing* and *yiqi*. In such a close-knit society, rumors spread quickly. A person thought to have little *renqing* will be admitted to few *guanxi* networks and will never be promoted.

Han, the committee member in charge of the organizational work of Town D, held this position for 10 years without being promoted. He had *guanxi* with the deputy head of the county, but in 2017 the deputy head resigned due to corruption and Han could not find another *guanxi* leader to help him get promoted. This upset him greatly, and he occasionally shared his pain with the author over drinks. By early 2022, when the author carried out post-fieldwork, Han had still not been promoted; worse, he had stepped down and become a common worker in the government of Town D because some village cadres elected were found to have a criminal history, and he, as the committee member in charge of organization, had been punished for dereliction of duty. However, many cadres revealed that if Han had had a powerful patron, he would not have been punished. Many cadres at different levels, including the head of the Party organization department of County X, argued that Han knew little about the rules of *renqing*, although he is a kind man. He always just eats without serving the leaders in banquets, gives cheap gifts to leaders in public (should be expensive and give in secret), sometimes says things openly that should have been kept secret, and does not master the technique to take more bribe and share it with his supervisors. This is not a good reputation for someone seeking to survive in a bureaucracy.

Trust Chain Anti-Corruption Coping Strategies

During the anti-corruption campaign, many cadres stepped down or were convicted, but some, according to many interviewees, were 'scapegoats' who sacrificed themselves in order to protect

⁸⁴The author attended the banquet in October 2019 and conducted observations.

their leaders and brothers/sisters. For example, in 2014, Xu, principal of an elite school, received a three-year prison sentence for accepting bribes. However, when Xu was arrested, he did not betray his superior, Hong, or the county secretary. Xu became a scapegoat for his patronage network. He made sacrifices for his close *guanxi* within the trust chain. His patron, Hong, and the county secretary used their *guanxi* to take care of him when he was in prison and also took care of his wife and son. They arranged for his wife, a teacher, to gain a better position in the school. They also took care of their son's education. When Xu was released after three years, Hong and some businessmen helped him become the principal of an elite private school with a high salary. When the author conducted research in County X, many people mentioned this case approvingly, saying that Xu was a good person who made sacrifices to protect his patrons, and now his carer was also very good. Such cases set an example for other cadres, increasing their assurance to engage in corruption.

Network members are willing to sacrifice themselves and become scapegoats because they trust that other network members will take care of them and their families. This high level of trust stems from the fact that in a patronage network, everyone must have *yiqi* to everyone else. Without *yiqi*, an individual risks exclusion and a bad reputation. *Yiqi* compels an arrested individual to safeguard their *guanxi*. The arrested person would rather go to prison than rebel against their patronage network; rebelling would lead *guanxi* members to sanction them.

Some argue that the two parties share the risks of being caught once a corruption transaction is concluded between them and both of them attempt to keep the secret and protect each other.⁸⁵ Along with such instrumental consideration, some traditional ideas that both parties share, such as *yiqi*, *renqing*, cannot be neglected. In County X, many local officials have a few close businessperson friends around him/her. These businesspersons usually act as intermediary to channel benefit to the official who in return gives the businesspersons public resource and benefit by using his/her power influence. They are not only 'symbiotic clientelism', but also close friends. In such *guanxi* relationship, friendship is always more important than transactions.

When Xiao (a friend of Shen mentioned earlier) was released from the prison in 2023, his close friends, some businessmen, came to the prison and took him to a high-class hotel (owned by one of the businessmen) to wash up and hold a ritual to get rid of unluckiness before sending him home. In the evening, they host a lavish banquet to celebrate Xiao's release with Shen presenting in the banquets. They arranged everything for Xiao and his future. They have life-long friendships rather than merely an instrumental relationship or 'symbiotic clientelism'.⁸⁶

Based on moral, emotional, and instrumental considerations, the investigated corrupt officials did not expose all other corrupt officials involved. Zhou, the head of the Construction Bureau of County X, was investigated in 2023 for taking kickbacks from many construction projects. He confessed where the embezzled money was spent, but he could not explain 3.5 million of it. According to cadres who know Zhou well, Zhou had given the 3.5 million to his patron. But he did not expose his patron who was also his best friend and benefactor. So he lied to the disciplinary inspection department (*jiwei*) that he lost the 3.5 million in gambling. Later, he exposes more than 20 cadres and businessmen who used to gamble with him. The people who participated in gambling with Zhou were all his casual friends, who were later punished with five-days detention (gambling is illegal in China).⁸⁷

Another way of dealing with anti-corruption measures is to send people of their patronage networks to the disciplinary inspection department (*jiwei*). The anti-corruption campaigns of the last decade required more personnel, so many cadres were transferred to *jiwei*. Some patrons sent their own people to *jiwei* in order to prevent detection.

Xie was the committee member in charge of organizational work in Town C. In 2012, he used the *guanxi* of his uncle, Zhong, a famous entrepreneur, to transfer to the city organization department as

⁸⁵Jiangnan Zhu, (n 10).

⁸⁶Interview with Niu, December 2023.

⁸⁷Observation and interview, Hong, Niu, and Zhou's sister, December 2023.

deputy section chief. Xie's uncle introduced him to the head of organization department, to whom Xie gave a bribe for the promotion. However, in 2016, Zhong was arrested for bribing officials and Xie was transferred to a department with less political and financial power and has never been promoted since.⁸⁸ Zhong received a five-million-yuan fine but regained his business and power influence in 2018. He asked Xie to go to work for *jiwei* in order to protect their people; Xie used *guanxi* and manage to do so in 2020 and become a *jiwei* group leader. When interviewed in 2023 (post-fieldwork), Xie said many cadres respected him very much and gave him gifts at festivals because he was their patron. But he was afraid of retaliation by those cadres if they were to be arrested in the future: 'I cannot work here for too long. In a few years, I will transfer away, and my uncle will arrange for another person to *jiwei*'.

Patronage networks always have strategies to deal with anti-corruption measures and remain resilient based on trust chains. Loyalty, obligation and traditional *renqing* ethics support their corrupt practices.

Trust Chains, Rather Than Trust, Facilitate Patronage Networks

Guanxi in patronage networks not only plays the role as trust but more importantly, in trust chains connecting two or more pairs of dyadic trust relationships. If dyadic trust relationships cannot be connected pair-to-pair, trust cannot be used to facilitate corrupt exchanges even though there exist lots of trust relationships inside the networks. Anti-corruption measures force trust chains to require higher levels of trust and loyalty, which usually involves close and long-term *guanxi*. An example of this is the case of Gao, where three pairs of *guanxi* connections (Gao and his cousin Deng, Deng and the deputy mayor, and the deputy mayor and the county secretary) are all long-term close contacts. Dyadic trust can only be connected at a high level, such as in Qian's case, rather than at a low level (Wang, for example) to form a trust chain when a high-pressure anti-corruption campaign is running.

Two key factors allow dyadic trust relationships to form a trust chain: all dyadic trust relationships involved need to be strong, and everyone involved needs to be highly motivated to offer help or act as an intermediary. However, both trust and the desire to offer help are influenced by traditional culture. Trust is influenced by traditional ideas of loyalty and *renqing*. Offering help is motivated by *renqing* and traditional morality, such as *zhong* (loyalty) and *yi* (righteousness or brotherhood).⁸⁹ Due to such a culture, one can trust another without face-to-face familiarity, based on the actor's knowledge of other people's personal loyalty.

Many studies of patronage in China focus only on dyadic patronage relationships rather than patronage networks. Most previous research on *guanxi* take *guanxi* as trust, which cannot fully express its function in a social network. If dyadic trust relationships cannot be connected pair-to-pair, patronage networks cannot function properly since a trust chain cannot be formed, even though lots of trust relationships exist inside the networks. In the previous example, Gao asked his cousin Deng for a favour; Deng turned to the deputy mayor, who asked the county secretary for the favour. In this trust chain, the deputy mayor and the county secretary felt safe to take Gao's bribe and give him a promotion. In Wang's case, Wang offered to bribe the county secretary, but the secretary refused, because their trust chain had not been established. However, Qian was introduced to the secretary by a businessman who had long-term *guanxi* with the secretary and the secretary highly trust him, so two pairs of trust were connected and their trust chain was built.

Trust in *guanxi* can be transferable due to personal loyalty and *renqing*, which is different from what Barbalet claimed: 'trust is not transitive' based on a different culture and the emotion characteristic of trust.⁹⁰ The trust chain is the foundation of a patronage network, and it is what

⁸⁸Observation and interview, Xie, Zhong, and Xie's father. Xie, male, 40, section chief of the city organization department, December 2018.

⁸⁹Xuezhi Guo, (n 46).

⁹⁰Jack Barbalet, 'A characterization of trust, and its consequences' [2009] 38(4) *Theory and Society* 367–82.

makes it function appropriately, which makes corruption more persistent. Without a culture of personal loyalty and *renqing*, trust may not be transferred or expanded to an acquaintance circle. This hinders the formation of a robust trust chain, rendering patronage networks more vulnerable to being destroyed by anti-corruption measures.

Cultural and Institutional Factors Reproduce Each Other, Leading to a Vicious Circle of Corruption

The efficacy of trust mechanisms within indirect *guanxi* (patronage networks) stems from specific cultural foundations. This tradition significantly prioritizes personal loyalty and obligations while exhibiting very weak adherence to democratic principles and the rule of law. Crucially, such cultural patterns emerge from millennia of entrenched political institutions and social structures. While prior scholarship establishes that both cultural and institutional forces collectively undermine anti-corruption efforts—sustaining corruption’s resilience in China⁹¹—this article advances a critical extension: these factors engage in mutual reproduction, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of systemic corruption.

Political and economic institutions can make corruption more likely, hindering China’s anti-corruption efforts.⁹² However, cultural factors also play a part. There are two subcultures relevant to corruption: the political culture within officialdom and the social culture in the larger society.⁹³ For the political culture, corruption behavior of Chinese officials is not an individual conduct, but an organizational activity derived from the organization field of Chinese bureaucracy influenced significantly by informal politics and the Confucian hierarchical system.⁹⁴ For the social culture, values such as *renqing*, *yiqi*, particularism, and bureaucratism, play a significant role in corruption. These traditional cultural values facilitate the trust and assurance mechanisms of officialdom, perpetuating corrupt patronage networks. In fact, political culture and social culture influence each other. Due to the social culture of *renqing* and *yiqi*, cadres do not feel guilty about giving or receiving bribes, and *renqing* instills in them a sense of reasonableness, righteousness and justification for their actions.

In the County X, cadres and ordinary villagers generally believe that it is reasonable for cadres to take kickbacks, bribes, and benefits. Cadres consider a promotion as a big favour from their supervisors, in return, they should give bribe, gifts, service and show their loyalty to their supervisors.

Likewise, political culture influences social culture too. Corruption culture in officialdom spreads into the society quickly, including state-own and private company, and ordinary people’s daily life. *Renqing* ethic, which was originally a rule of reciprocity among ordinary people to guide their daily conducts, now has been shaped by corrupt political culture so that the ordinary people in County X consider bribery as *renqing* or gifts, a reasonable tradition.

For many cadres in this county, being corrupt is more secure than being free from corruption. If they are caught and imprisoned, their patronage networks will support them in prison. However, if one is free from corruption, one will be excluded from his/her networks and has a bad reputation of lacking *renqing*, but he/she still has risk of being accused of corruption or negligence of duty due to the lack of rule of law (e.g. the case of Han). If he/she were sentenced, no one would support them in prison. Therefore, many cadres choose corruption and join patronage networks even under high pressure anti-corruption campaign.

⁹¹Xuezhong Guo, (n 28). Ben Hillman, (n 29) 620; Jiangnan Zhu, (n 17).

⁹²Jing Vivian Zhan, (n 33); Wooyeal Paik and Richard Baum, (n 33); Ting Gong, (n 11); Yong Guo and Songfeng Li, (n 19); Ben Hillman, (n 29); Qiang Fang and Xiaobing Li (eds.) (n 8); Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping: Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?* (Routledge 2015); Jiangnan Zhu and Yiping Wu, (n 28).

⁹³Jiangnan Zhu and Yiping Wu, (n 28) 315.

⁹⁴Ting Gong and Hanyu Xiao, ‘The Formation and Impact of Isomorphic Pressures: The Case of Position-related Consumption in Chinese Bureaucratic Organizations’ [2017] 30(3) *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 387–05.

It is worth noting that cultural and institutional factors influence, reinforce and reproduce each other. The culture and values of the people and officials, such as a high level of *renqing* and little respect for the rule of law, a high level of particularism and a low level of universalism, will affect the state's political institutions and daily political practice. Key cadre participants in this study, such as Hong, Gao, Xie, Shen, Niu, Qian and Huang, are all deeply influenced by *renqing* and local corruption culture, which influence their style of working and governance.

The flawed institution in some rural area in turn reinforces the culture and values of people with a high degree of particularism, *renqing* and bureaucratism. The author's long-term observations show that some cadres had a high respect to rule of law, belief in democracy, and equality when they were young. However, after working in government bureaucracy for many years, they changed; they became corrupt and full of servility, arbitrariness, bureaucratism and local *renqing* culture. If people do not have a good sense of democracy and the spirit of law but do have a good sense of *renqing* and *yiqi*, patronage networks and corruption will continue to exist. It seems that cultural and institutional factors reinforce and reproduce each other, hindering anti-corruption efforts and leading to a vicious circle of corruption in China.

Why do patronage networks maintain resilience despite anti-corruption efforts? The trust mechanisms rooted in specific cultural traditions enable their persistence. This cultural framework facilitates the reproduction of corrupt institutions, while longstanding institutional deficiencies simultaneously reinforce the culture. It is this vicious cycle that perpetuates patronage network resilience amid anti-corruption campaigns.

Is the case of County X attributable to a systemic adaptation to anti-corruption policies nationwide? In fact, a single county-level case study cannot provide a definitive answer. However, similar phenomena may emerge in other rural areas of China that share similar cultural and institutional conditions—particularly where strong *renqing* culture prevails, and institutional settings feature frequent turnover of county secretaries, power concentration to top local leaders, and intense anti-corruption pressure. Under such conditions, corruption tends to grow more covert, while patronage networks shrink in size but tighten in structure. These networks increasingly rely on high-trust dyadic relationships, forming exclusive 'trust chains' to facilitate corrupt exchanges. Together, cultural and institutional factors reshape how rural patronage networks forge strategic alliances.

It is important to note that the dynamics in County X continue to evolve as anti-corruption efforts intensify. In the future, patronage networks may contract further. Yet, traditional *guanxi* culture—encompassing *renqing*, *ganqing*, *mianzi*, and *yiqi*—could sustain their resilience. Only sustained, high-pressure anti-corruption campaigns over an extended period, coupled with robust institutional reforms, can fundamentally transform this entrenched culture of corruption.

Conclusion

Research on patronage networks and *guanxi* shows how these networks influence public officials' distribution of state resources, revealing the growth of corruption in such networks and the causes of that corruption from an institutional perspective.⁹⁵ However, previous research rarely explored how corrupt rural networks changed and survived in the face of President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption crackdown. Most studies on China's anti-corruption campaign over the past ten years have used a top-down perspective, ignoring the perspectives of individual officials from the bottom. Using hard-to-obtain empirical evidence from a rural county, this article investigated how patronage networks are transformed from the perspective of individual cadres in the context of anti-corruption drive with frequent replacement of local top leaders, adding value to the study of patronage and corruption in rural China.

⁹⁵Jing Vivian Zhan, (n 33); Wooyeal Paik and Richard Baum, (n 33); Junyan Jiang, (n 33); Ben Hillman, (n 29); Peng Wang and Xia Yan, (n 33).

Focusing on the use of indirect *guanxi* by rural cadres to gain promotion and protection, this study introduces the concept of ‘trust chain’—sequences of dyadic trust relationships connected through indirect *guanxi*. These trust chains enable patronage networks to remain resilient despite anti-corruption efforts. Only high levels of dyadic trust relationships, based on traditional concepts such as *renqing* and *yiqi*, can be connected to form a ‘trust chain’ for protection and promotion under current strong anti-corruption measures. Trust chain anti-corruption coping strategies, such as sending people of their networks to *jiwei*, acting as ‘scapegoats’, make patronage networks resistant to anti-corruption crackdown, and such coping strategies are significantly based on some traditional concepts. Due to strong trust chains and a flawed institutional system in some rural areas, being corrupt is more secure for cadres than being free from corruption. Therefore, many cadres choose corruption even under high pressure anti-corruption campaign.

This article concludes that *guanxi* in patronage networks functions not only as trust, but, more importantly, as a trust chain, which connects dyadic trust relationships to channel benefits and provide protection, and that cultural factors such as personal loyalty, *renqing* and *yiqi*, and flawed institutions reproduce each other, resulting in a vicious circle of corruption. While numerous dyadic trust relationships may exist within a network, most corrupt practices cannot proceed if these connections remain isolated. It is therefore the interconnected trust chain—rather than trust itself—that enables the majority of corrupt exchanges. This conclusion represents a significant advancement in the theoretical understanding of trust, patronage networks, and corruption.

This research has several limitations. First, there is a time constraint: fieldwork was conducted from March 2017 to October 2019, and circumstances may have shifted considerably in recent years, particularly as the anti-corruption campaign continues to intensify. In fact, many of the cadres and businessmen discussed in this article were arrested or stepped down just as the article was accepted for publication—a reflection of the ongoing crackdown. Second, the county examined here is distinctive in certain respects, and its characteristics may not be representative of most other counties in China. Finally, much of the corruption reported here may only reflect surface-level phenomena, as uncovering the full truth is difficult for a single scholar to investigate in depth.

Nevertheless, the ethnographically derived concept of the ‘trust chain’ or ‘trust–loyalty chain’ offers a valuable theoretical contribution to understanding the operational logic of Chinese officialdom. In practice, this dynamic functions across many areas of Chinese society characterized by factional networks—such as martial arts schools (门派 *menpai*), academic lineages based on individual PhD supervisors (师门 *shimen*), traditional Chinese medicine factions, and the performing arts factions. While Fei Xiaotong’s *chaxugeju* (differential mode of association) is widely invoked to explain the horizontal dimension of traditional Chinese social structure, the trust chain explored here provides a lens for understanding its vertical dimension—an avenue that merits further scholarly investigation.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the suggestions, comments and advice of two anonymous reviewers. We also wish to express our gratitude to Professor Jack Barbalet and Professor Baogang He for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Yuanyuan Lu**: Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, under Grant No.[23BSH027].

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Research ethics and consent statement

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, obtaining written consent was deemed neither feasible nor appropriate. A written record of participation could have posed a potential risk to participants, creating anxiety and compromising the openness and trust necessary for ethnographic engagement. It could also have served as an incriminating document in the high-pressure political environment described. Therefore, verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in interviews, conversations, or observed activities. The process of obtaining consent was integrated into the ongoing, relationship-based ethnographic methodology.

Prior to discussions, participants were verbally informed in their local language about: the researcher's identity as a scholar from a university conducting academic research on local culture and governance; the general aim of understanding social and professional life in the county; the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to decline to answer any question or to end the conversation at any time without any negative consequence; the intended use of the information for academic analysis and publication; the strict measures to be taken to protect their anonymity and confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms for all persons and places, the omission of identifying details, and the secure storage of field notes. By proceeding with the conversation after this explanation, participants agreed to have their views, experiences, and anonymized contextual information used for the purpose of this scholarly study.

The research design prioritized the protection of participants above all else. The decision to rely on verbal consent was a necessary and carefully considered ethical choice, balancing the rigorous requirements of social science with the responsibility to minimize risk to individuals participating in a study on a sensitive subject within their specific socio-political environment.