Building Trust in a Matrix of Distrust: Chinese International Students' Experiences in the UK

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Abstract

This study investigates how trust is constructed among Chinese international students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although much research addresses trust and migration, trust among international students remains underexplored. To address this gap, we propose a new theoretical approach of building trust within a matrix of distrust. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 70 Chinese international students who studied in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdowns from 2020 to 2021, we identify four main trust-relevant situations: performing public health rituals, learning during the pandemic, managing emotional well-being, and making sense of COVID policies. Our findings reveal that trust construction involved complex interactions with various trustees, challenging existing binary categorisations between generalised and particularised trust and in-group/out-group dynamics. We observed trust-building across ethnic boundaries and trust-contesting within in-groups, as well as shifts in political trust when exposed to alternative approaches. These findings demonstrate the limitations of existing trust categorizations and emphasize the need to consider trust as an evolving, context-dependent process. By focusing on building trust, this new theoretical approach not only allows us to uncover the sites and processes of trust construction but also to systematically map out how trustors and trustees interact in the matrix of trust-relevant situations.

Keywords: Trust Construction; Social Practice; the Matrix of Distrust; Chinese International Students; Covid-19

1. Introduction

Since Donald Trump referred to COVID-19 as "the Chinese Virus" in a Tweet on March 17, 2020 (Hswen et al., 2021), Chinese international students have drawn significant media and academic attention, particularly regarding their experiences of stigma, their lessened presence in higher education institutions, and the impacts of that decline. One topic that has gotten short shrift in this context, however, is trust. This oversight reflects a broader pattern in which trust among international students has been largely neglected by scholars.

Media coverage has highlighted the rise in anti-Chinese hostility and hate crimes against Chinese international students rose in both the United States and in the United Kingdom (Huang et al., 2023; Murphy, 2020), while academic research has documented their experiences

of stigmatization, victimization, and alienation in these countries (Allen & Ye, 2021; Cao et al., 2021; Ji & Chen, 2023; Jin & Wang, 2023; Ma & Zhan, 2022). Scholars have also investigated how Trump's "Chinese Virus" language exacerbated geopolitical relations between China and global north countries allied with the United States and the implications of this for Chinese international students (Allen & Ye, 2021; Ma & Zhan, 2022). Some studies have assessed significant ruptures in U.S.- China research and innovation collaborations, knowledge exchange, and bilateral student exchange opportunities; others have investigated the declining number of Chinese international students and the ramifications for higher education sectors in both the U.S. and the UK (Allen & Ye, 2021).

While there is voluminous research on trust and migration, little attention has been given to trust among international students specifically. For instance, studies on the impact of cultural heritage on immigrants' and emigrants' trust (Bilodeau & White, 2016; Moschion & Tabasso, 2014) rarely consider international students as a distinct migrant category. Likewise, research exploring migration experiences on trust (Dinesen & Hooghe, 2010; Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2015; Wu & Wilkes, 2018) tends to focus on differences in trust levels between host and home countries without interrogating the migration experiences of international students. Meanwhile, research on international students (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Findlay et al., 2012; Tindal et al., 2015) often lack a systematic analysis how trust shapes their study and migration experiences. Scholarship on Chinese international students during the pandemic (Ma & Zhan, 2022; Ji & Chen, 2023; Jin & Wang, 2023) frequently portrays stigmatization and alienation as normalized lived experiences, without interrogating the agency of international students in bridging or contesting social connections. Even studies on social and political attitudes among Chinese international students (Jin & Wang, 2023) overlook their interactions with different trustees in specific trust-relevant situations.

Our limited understanding of trust in the context of Chinese international students highlights the need for a new theoretical approach—one that bridges research on trust with scholarship on international student experiences. In response, this article proposes a reconceptualization of trust. We define trust as a moral, normative, and functional mechanism embedded within interpersonal relationships, institutions, and broader social structures (Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 1995; Uslaner & Conley, 2003). However, rather than viewing trust as a static or abstract norm—such as generalised or particularised trust, or as social and political trust (Delhey et al., 2011; Fukuyama, 1996; Uslaner & Conley, 2003)—we reconceptualise it as an interactive social practice. This new approach centres on doing trust: the everyday, situated interactions between trustors and trustees, and the dynamic processes of trusting and demonstrating trustworthiness. By focusing on these interactions, our conceptualisation captures the contingent, relational, and context-specific nature of trust-building, particularly within the matrix of distrust experienced during the global pandemic. This framework allows us to analyse trust not as a fixed attribute, but as a practice negotiated across three distinct yet interconnected levels.

This article develops a new theoretical approach to building trust within a matrix of distrust, drawing on in-depth interviews with 70 Chinese international students who studied in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdowns from 2020 to 2021. This article seeks to answer three key

questions: 1) What were the main trust-relevant situations in Chinese international students' lived experiences during the global pandemic? 2) How did these students navigate trust relationships with various social groups—including family members, friends, immediate Chinese networks, strangers, non-Chinese communities, host universities, and local communities? 3) How did participants construct trust across different sites where trust became salient? We identify four primary trust-relevant situations as sites of trust construction, ranging from the micro-level of performing public health rituals and managing emotional well-being to the meso-level learning during the pandemic, and the macro-level process of making sense of UK's COVID-19- related policies. We find that trust construction occurred through interactions between Chinese international students and trustees at multiple levels. Further, these processes of trust-building or trust-contesting were imbedded in specific situations, in which trustors' act of trust responded to trustees' act of trustworthiness. This new theoretical approach of trust in action therefore offers an opportunity for scholars to assess the complexity of trust construction in different contexts and to analyse interactions between trustors and trustees in various trust-relevant situations.

2. "Doing Trust" in the Matrix of Distrust

Existing scholarship tends to conceptualise trust through binary opposition trust versus distrust, high versus low trust, or in-group versus out-group trust. This dichotomous framing is especially prevalent in macro-level comparative studies that link patterns of generalised and particularised trust to economic development, political participation, and social cohesion (Delhey et al., 2011, 2014; Dinesen, 2012; Uslaner & Conley, 2003; Wilkes, 2011). Particularised trust is typically associated with strong, face-to-face ties within families or close-knit communities, where social sanctions reinforce compliance and reciprocity (Fukuyama, 1995; Portes, 1998; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011). Generalised trust, by contrast, refers to trust in strangers and the broader public—seen as fostering tolerance, civic engagement, and shared values (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Newton, 2009).

Even foundational accounts often reify these categories to distinguish "high-trust" and "low-trust" societies. Banfield (1958), for instance, attributed persistent poverty in Southern Italy to excessive particularised trust and a deficit of generalised trust. Similarly, Fukuyama (1995) argued that economic prosperity depends on high generalised and low particularised trust, while underdevelopment stems from the reverse. These dichotomies have been reinforced through cross- national surveys—particularly the World Values Survey—leading to increasingly sophisticated yet reductive models of societal trust (Delhey et al., 2011; Delhey & Welzel, 2012; Frederiksen et al., 2016).

At the individual level, trust research follows two main trajectories: cultural and experiential. The cultural approach treats trust as a fixed trait, instilled early through socialisation and embedded in cultural value systems (Delhey et al., 2011; Uslaner & Conley, 2003). In contrast, the experiential approach examines how life experiences—such as education, social interaction, or political involvement—shape trust. While more dynamic, this perspective still tends to frame trust in binary terms: trust is either gained or lost based on individual exposure (Tao et al., 2014; Uslaner & Brown, 2005; Wu, 2020). Education offers a prime

example. Numerous studies link higher education to increased generalized trust across diverse contexts (Huang et al., 2011; Niedlich et al., 2021; Wu & Shi, 2020), reinforcing the assumption that trust operates in predictable, linear ways.

Increasingly, however, scholars have discovered complex overlaps between trust and distrust, high and low trust, or in-group and out-group (dis) trust particularly through studies of migration, which traces high-level generalized/trust patterns among migrants in low-trust societies or vice versa. Some of these studies highlight the impact of persistent cultural factors on trust, arguing that trust is transmitted as part of cultural reproduction across generations despite migration to different country contexts with different levels of generalized trust (Moschion & Tabasso, 2014). The second set of studies have argued that trust levels present in destination countries may affect generalized trust among migrants (Dinesen & Hooghe, 2010; Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2015; Wu & Wilkes, 2018). In this view, migrants may exhibit decreased trust levels when residing in countries where generalized trust is lower than their countries of origin, while they become more trusting in host countries where generalized trust is higher than in their home country. Yet even this emerging debate remains constrained by its focus on cultural versus experiential determinants of trust levels, rather than questioning the fundamental adequacy of binary trust frameworks themselves.

Emergent scholarship has become increasingly interested in how (mis)trust is produced or contested through interactions between trustors and trustees (Dodson et al., 2023; Ho, 2021; Kuwabara, 2015; Smith, 2005). This focus on locating trust-relevant situations (Smith, 2005) marks a shift away from the preoccupation of the dichotomous trust framing to understanding trust in action. For instance, Dodson and colleagues' (2023) further revealed the complexity of (mis)trust and (un)trustworthiness in research on responses to sexual misconduct in U.S. workplaces. They found that co-workers' moral values of loyalty towards and trust in organizations sometimes override their trust in victims and their experiences (Dodson et al., 2023). They attribute this to himpathy, that is, the support of alleged perpetrators rather than victims, which they describe as a result of the hierarchal structures in the workplace promoting authority and loyalty, which are further embedded in the individuals' processes of evaluating trustworthiness, thus disadvantaging women.

This growing body of literature demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing trust in action in specific trust-relevant situations. Building on this work, we advance two theoretical interventions, drawing inspiration from West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" (1987), Swidler's concept of "unsettled times" (1986), and Richie's "matrix of violence" (2012, 2022). First, we propose re-conceptualizing trust as an interactive social practice instead of as an abstract norm or a binary state. While this approach shares some conceptual ground with West and Zimmerman's "doing gender", trust differs crucially in that it is not merely a routine, methodical practice where individuals conform to established cultural norms. Instead, "doing trust" involves complex processes of interactions between trustors, trustees, acts of trust, and demonstrations of trustworthiness. These interactions are evolving and further mediated by culture, experiences, and life course transitions as well as external stressors such as the global pandemic.

Second, we introduce the concept of a "matrix of distrust" in "unsettled times" of the global pandemic. We build upon Swidler's theory of culture in action (1986), particularly her analysis of "unsettled times" when established cultural practices and social actions become misaligned during challenging socioeconomic and political circumstances. Our conceptualization of the matrix of distrust maps the interconnected cultural, social, political, and institutional circumstances that amplify distrust. This framework draws inspiration from Richie's matrix of violence (2012, 2022), which illuminates both specific sites of harm and the intersecting systems that perpetuate violence. The matrix of distrust operates across three distinct yet interconnected levels. At the micro level, individual socioeconomic, cultural, racial, and ethnic characteristics shape personal experiences of trust and distrust. The meso level includes networks, communities, and trust-relevant situations where the dynamics between trustors and trustees unfold. At the macro level, broader economic, political, and social circumstances create the overarching context within which trust relations develop or deteriorate. Crucially, these levels interact dynamically. Changes at the individual level can reshape interactions within communities and trust-relevant situations, while structural changes in formal and informal networks may equally influence individual behavior in trust-relevant contexts. To demonstrate the analytical utility of this framework, we apply it to examine trust-building processes among Chinese international students studying in the UK during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

3. The Research Context: Chinese International Students "Doing Trust" in the Matrix of Distrust During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created unique circumstances which make Chinese international students' experiences particularly valuable for examining the matrix of distrust. The period represents "unsettled times", where political, economic, and cultural circumstances heighten distrust, offering unique opportunities for researching "doing trust". First, the geopolitical context was especially significant. Following Donald Trump's characterization of COVID-19 as the "China virus", Chinese international students faced escalating hostility and hate crimes in countries such as the US and UK (Hu et al., 2022; Ma & Zhan, 2022). This situation spawned two competing narratives: some scholars argue that Global North politicians scapegoated China—an emerging economic power—to deflect attention from their inadequate pandemic responses and internal political conflicts (Allen & Ye, 2021). Others focus on the practical implications, particularly how these tensions affect international student mobility, knowledge exchange, and the financial stability of higher education sectors that depend heavily on Chinese student tuition (Portes, 2024). The intensified geopolitical circumstances of 2020-2021 illuminated complex trust relationships between universities and national governments. These manifested in several key areas: competing interests in international student visa policies, public health communication strategies, coordination of pandemic responses, and responsibilities for international student safety (Adams et al., 2023). Moreover, this context provides valuable insights into how Chinese international students "do trust"-actively constructing and negotiating trust. Jin and Wang's (2022) research demonstrates how these students experienced "double stigmatization"—both in their host country and at home—leading them to reassess their political beliefs, civic values, and attitudes towards both governments.

Second, Chinese international students lived experiences during the pandemic provide a

unique case for investigating the sites and interactions between them and various trustees across the micro- level, meso-level and macro-level. At the micro level, individual characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, and prior educational experiences significantly influenced students' interactions with host communities and universities (Ma & Zhan, 2022). These personal factors shaped both their vulnerability to discrimination and their capacity to build trust in new environments. The meso level reveals how students navigated institutional relationships and community networks. Ma and Zhan's (2022) research documented how fear of racial abuse led students to develop protective strategies, including limiting their engagement with university and local communities. Zhu et al. (2024) extended this analysis, revealing how students experienced alienation from various institutional support systems, despite universities' efforts to provide communication channels and support services. At the macro level, Ji and Chen's (2022) work demonstrated how broader societal hostility in the United States created conditions of extreme vulnerability for Chinese international students. This vulnerability was compounded by the complex interplay between national policies, public health measures, and international relations. These multi-dimensional, trust-relevant situations provide rich opportunities to analyse trust-building processes between Chinese international students (as trustors) and various trustees—including host universities, formal and informal communities, and host/home governments—during unsettled times.

3.1 Data and Methods

3.1.1 The Sample

The data used in this study come from 70 in-depth individual interviews with Chinese international students who were studying in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted remotely between November 2020 and May 2021. Table 1 provides descriptive characteristics of our sample. Participants included self-identified male (n=29) and female (n=41) students aged between 21 and 37 who were pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate degrees at the time of the first lockdown in the UK, March 20, 2020. The sample included 32 respondents pursuing STEM-related fields of study and 38 enrolled in social sciences, arts and humanities, and the law studies courses. The recruitment of participants covered most regions in the UK except Northern Ireland.

Table 1
A Summary of Respondents' Demographic Details (n=70)

Demographic Details		No.
Age	20-30	59
	31-40	11
Gender	Female	41
	Male	29
Length of Migration	Less than 12 months	17
	More than 12 months	53
Level of Study	Undergraduate degree	2
	Postgraduate Taught degrees	46
	Postgraduate research degrees	22
Fields of Study	STEM	32
	Non-STEM	38
University location in the UK	England	49
	Scotland	17
	Wales	4

We started the research recruitment via our own networks of Chinese international students, most of whom were pursuing postgraduate study at the time. We circulated our recruitment advertisement titled: "新冠危机, 孤岛之历 " via these WeChat groups for potential participants. Circulating our project recruitment only in Chinese serves two purposes. First, leveraging linguistic familiarity was the first step of trust building with our potential research population. Prior research shows that the use of the native language and local dialects is not only helpful for obtaining in-depth and detailed qualitative data but also crucial for bridging social distance between researchers and the research participants (Van Nes et al., 2010). Second, the use of Chinese, specifically framing our solicitation in two four-word poetic phrases, conveys a concise message about the key objectives of this research project, namely lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We framed our inquiry as "experiences in the Covid" without priming participants about trust. Third, instead of referencing the UK, we called the place of study "孤岛 a lonely island" as a way to evoke shared sentiments about isolation and social distancing in the time of the pandemic. The strategy proved effective in that recruitment quickly snow-balled into wider networks through WeChat groups, covering Chinese international students across the UK. We received an overwhelming expression of interest in participating in the project and interviewing all would have exceeded the capacity of our small research team at the time.

3.2 Research Procedures

After obtaining approval for the project from the author A's university's Research Ethics Committee, we started a pilot study with two participants to test the validity of the interview questions. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and transcribed in Chinese in full. All identifying information was deleted from the transcripts and pseudonyms were used from this point forward. Assessing our own positionality with respect to this project was an ongoing process. All three members of the research team are ethnic Chinese. Author A is a tenured academic and Authors B and C were postgraduate research students at the time of data collection. As we research trust, we were acutely aware of how the enactment of trust in hierarchical relationships complicates our project. In order to give agency and voice to our research participants, the team rearranged the fieldwork roles with Authors B and C conducting all the interviews and Author A responsible for the research design, the interview questions, and transcriptions.

3.3 Data Analysis Strategies

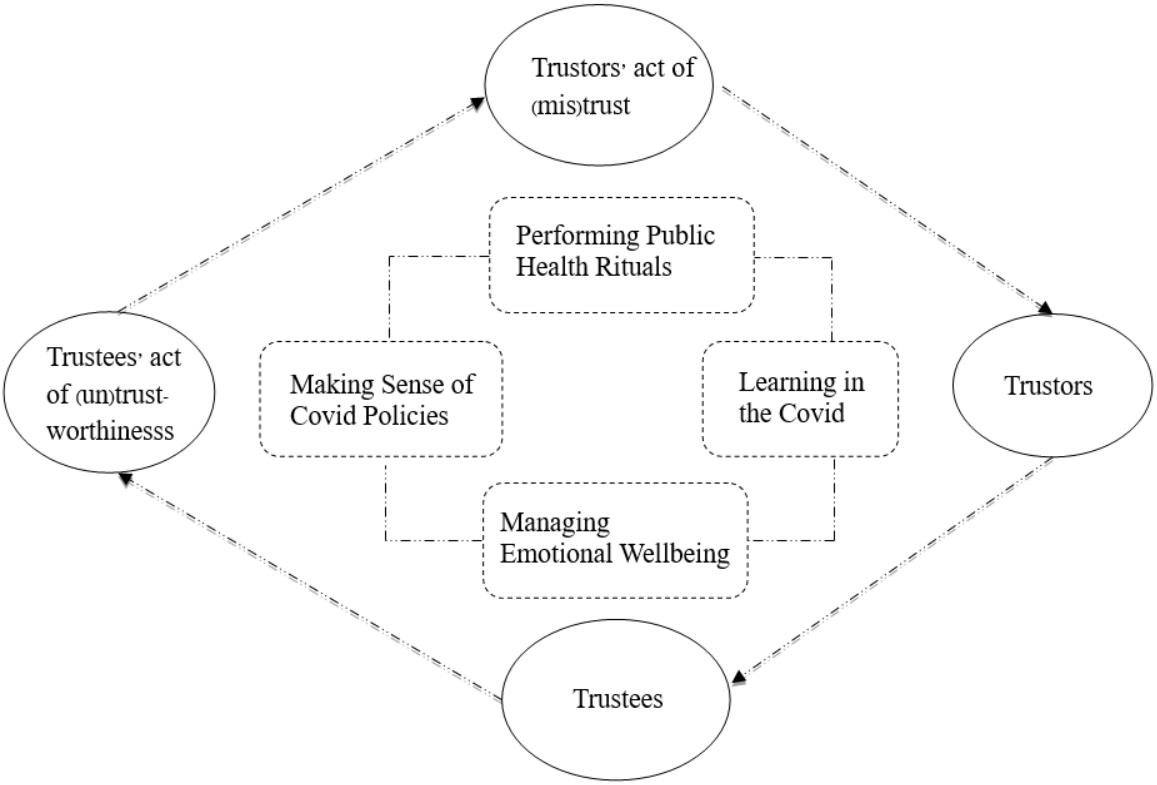
The final 70 interviews were used for data analysis. These 70 interviews allowed us to cover the main research inquiries, to add depth and additional themes, which satisfied criteria for data and thematic saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Data saturation was reached after 37 interviews, but new thematic dimensions emerged between the 45th and 67th interviews. Regardless of the number of interviews in a study, the key to obtaining robust qualitative data lies in exposure (Small & Calarco, 2022), that is, the number of hours spent in fieldwork. The total exposure through individual interviews was 129.27 hours, reflecting interviews ranging from 1.08 to 2.27 hours. In total, we logged 134.87 fieldwork hours.

The main analytical strategies involved coding and mapping. Coding bridges the qualitative data and the conceptual framework of trust in action. The first round is open coding, which involves reading all transcripts and field notes, highlighting recurring themes, and reflecting on emergent issues in a series of memos. This process allowed us to generate a list of initial codes marking trust-relevant situations at different levels, which we entered in the Nvivo software for a review of all the data. The Nvivo coding was fed by the initial sets of codes, but coding proceeded iteratively in several rounds. During this process, we were able to reflect, expand, and modify the initial sets of codes and highlight deviant incidents. In the second round, we drew the codes together and then identified different trustees in different "situations" at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. In the final round, we drew the codes together and then map interactions between Chinese international students and trustees at micro-, meso- and macro-levels in different trust-relevant situations.

4. The Matrix of Distrust During the Pandemic

To contextualise the matrix of mistrust during the pandemic, we have identified four main sites of trust-relevant situations, ranging from micro-level of the performance of public health rituals and management of emotional well-being to meso-level of the management of learning experiences, to the macro-level of assessment the COVID policies. In each of these sites, Chinese international students interacted with multi-dimensional trustees from their close communities, to strangers, academics and to the policymakers. These interactions also occurred across all levels. Figure 1 provides a visual map of the matrix of distrust in the pandemic.

Figure 1
Doing Trust in the Matrix of Distrust



Note: This figure is generated by researchers

The first site is the daily performance of public health rituals among communities. These rituals, such as masking, disinfecting, social distancing, regulate behavior, focus on performance, and seeking connection (Hobson et al., 2018). Within this site, Chinese international students engaged with various trustees at different levels, including friends, classmates, professors, strangers, Chinese student networks, university communities, local communities while studying in the UK. The act of trustworthiness means strict compliance with and performance of these public health rituals, with non-compliance signaling untrustworthiness. The second trust-relevant site describes the management of emotional and mental well-being during the pandemic lockdowns. Trustees in this sites included family members, friends, classmates, Chinese student networks, university personal tutors, therapists, psychologists, and non-Chinese social networks. Trust was built and challenged through specific interactions with these trustees. The third trust-relevant site pertains to learning during the pandemic, primarily within the university setting. The trustees in this context included academics (professors, personal tutors, and Graduate Teaching Assistants) and university administration and management teams responsible for communicating about online learning technology, learning support, and COVID-19 guidelines. Trustworthy actions were specific to the roles of these trustees in supporting students' learning experiences during the pandemic.

The final trust-relevant site involves assessing specific policies implemented at the national level, which directly or indirectly affected our respondents during their time in the UK. The Covid-related public health and social policies considered included, but were not

limited to, the nation-wide lockdown, masking and social distancing rules, and vaccination rollout programs. In this site, trust was linked to the government's actions. Many respondents used China's COVID-related policies as a reference point, comparing them with their lived experiences in the UK to evaluate the trustworthiness of the UK's policies.

5. Doing Trust Through Contesting Boundaries

In the first trust-relevant site of performing public health rituals, there was a perception among our respondents that "Asian students" were diligent with complying with public health rituals. Xiaoli Wei, a female MA student who were in the UK for 21 months, described an interaction that changed her perspective. Xiaoli noticed a bottle of disinfectant hanging on the keyring on Lea's backpack and she recalled the start of her friendship with Lea: "it's rare to see a non-Chinese so serious about being vigilant. We started sitting 'together' with distance, eating lunch outside. She was comfortable with me because I was careful too". Xiaoli and Lea's friendship developed through a shared understanding of and strict compliance of the rituals. Failure to adhere to public health rituals caused divisions within Asian student communities as well. Xiyin described her frustrations and sense of distrust because she observed some fellow Chinese students who were "hang[ing] out together, cooking, eating. Guess what. They got the COVID and spread it among us. I understand we were very lonely and emotionally challeng[ed]. But their negligence hurt innocent and rule-abiding friends like me." A shared understanding of the importance of performing public health rituals promoted trust and created social connections, including across racial and ethnic lines. Likewise, non-compliance with these rituals created divisions and mistrust, even within Chinese student communities. By examining the trust-relevant situation of performing public health rituals, this analysis advances our knowledge of the complexity of trust-building and trust-contesting through interactions between trustors and trustees in the pandemic context. It also extends beyond the narrow binary conceptualization of high -low particularized trust with in-groups and out-groups in the Chinese culture (Huhe, 2014; Pye, 1999).

In the trust-relevant site of managing emotional and mental wellbeing, some of our respondents could not rely on family members but successfully connected with non-familial networks for support. These networks included digital gym buddies, online music clubs, poetry-writing clubs, video game partners, and K-pop dance clubs. Xueran Wu, a 23-year-old Master's student, explained why she could not confide in her parents about her struggles with isolation and study: her father had a "severe disability," and her mother was "struggling to care for him back home." Instead, Xueran coped with her emotional challenges by "dancing it out" with her "people"—a community of amateur dancers who practiced K-pop routines in outdoor public spaces in London. This shared passion for K-pop brought her into a community of "strangers from many parts of the world," who became a reliable source of emotional support during the pandemic.

While some respondents dealt with mental health issues privately, others sought formal support through professional therapists or psychologists available at their universities or through the UK National Health Service (NHS). For some, like Xueran, this was due to their families' "difficult circumstances in China." Others, like Xiaojing Wu, a 23-year-old Master's student, reported that their parents lacked empathy for their mental health issues. Like many respondents, Xiaojing struggled with academic pressure and loneliness during the lockdown. She sought help from her university's mental health services and the NHS, though both required her to wait more than eight weeks for assessment. Despite the wait, she ultimately found the NHS therapist she accessed to be "very experienced and professional." Xiaojing

explained her decision to seek professional help:

There is only so much you can share with your family and friends. When I was in a dark place, I wanted to talk to someone without being judged. I was very lucky to be seen by the professional therapist here. I wish I had competent therapists and psychologists back in China.

Similarly, Xujuan Zhang, a 24-year-old Master's student who had a history of self-harm, saw her mental health deteriorate during the lockdown. Both Xiaojing and Xujuan emphasized that the treatment they received from NHS therapists was "life-saving". Reflecting on her prior experiences when her parents actively prevented her from seeking professional help, Xujuan, who had engaged in self-harm, emphasized the importance of dismantling the mental health taboo through the role of trained psychologists and therapists: "We should trust professionals and experts on mental health, not parents."

These findings on the trust-relevant situations of emotional well-being and mental health reveal multiple pathways through which Chinese international students build trust with a range of trustees, including parents, friends, strangers with shared interests, and professionals. We argue that studying in the UK created a distance from the traditional familyist trust radius, allowing our respondents to engage with "strangers" through shared hobbies, interests, and professional channels. The lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic further amplified the need to connect beyond the constraints of networks defined by family ties, racial, or ethnic boundaries. These interactions allowed our respondents to evaluate acts of (un)trustworthiness, respond accordingly with acts of (mis)trust and draft their own narratives of trust based on their personal experiences rather than solely adhering to cultural norms.

In the third site of learning during COVID-19, we observed a similar pattern of using a cultural toolkit to assess the trustworthiness of various trustees. For instance, academics earned students' trust through the effective delivery of courses, responsiveness to students' needs—especially those related to the transition to online learning—and providing academic support. The vast majority of our respondents appreciated their professors' efforts in delivering virtual courses, managing the technological challenges of online learning, and empathizing with students' academic struggles during the lockdowns.

Minglang Sun, a 23-year-old master's student, recalled the professionalism of his professors during the sudden switch to online learning during the first wave of the national lockdown:

It was really hard to switch to online learning. We [students] weren't as talkative as in person. There were many awkward moments. But my teachers were all very professional. They went out of their way to get us to talk and engaged in the course content. They used different apps and visuals to make teaching more fun and easier to understand.

The findings on our respondents' trust in university professors align with prior studies on trust patterns deeply rooted in Chinese culture, where there is high respect and trust in scholars (teachers and professors) (Delhey et al. 2011; Liu and Shen 2021; Pye 1999; Wu and Wilkes 2018). However, our findings diverge from prior scholarship by emphasizing the interactive processes—"acts of (un)trustworthiness"—between academics, management, and our respondents, rather than simply following a cultural script of trust.

6. Multi-Scalar Trust Constructing and Contesting

This section illustrates the process of trust building and contesting across multiple sites in the context of making sense of COVID policies. A key trust-relevant situation involved determining whether to trust the British government, its institutions and their COVID-related public health policies. These policies included the nation-wide lockdown, masking and social

distancing rules, and vaccine roll- out programs, all of which directly affected respondents during their studies in the UK. The majority of our respondents found the British government's COVID-related public health policies to be "appropriate to the cultural and demographic context of the UK." They recognized that differences between British and Chinese COVID rules were context-specific and thus deemed appropriate. As Yuqing Ma, a 24-year-old master's student, reflected:

The UK lockdowns were not strict as the Chinese ones. They could not implement the Chinese rules here. It's a small country without a high population density. In China, there are so many people living so close to each other. Strict lockdown policies made sense in China too. Plus, people [in the UK] are so used to freedom and individual liberty. It would not have worked here.

Respondents also highlighted the consistent presence and involvement of medical experts and scientists in policymaking, which boosted their confidence in governmental decisions. For Xusu Liu, a 25-year-old master's student, the constant visibility of a chief science adviser during the COVID era was a reassuring sign of trustworthiness: "I liked the way the scientists presented the daily data and the projections of the infections. The data were mathematically convincing. Politics is a game, but maths don't lie." Jiexu Wu, a 24-year-old master's student, also expressed trust in science and "scientific rationale." Jiexu dismissed the Chinese media's portrait of "the crazy idea of the herd immunity," which Jiexu said, "was laid out scientifically and calculated with the consideration of the capacity of the national health system. I think nothing could be more rational." The emphasis on and the trust in science over politics was echoed by many respondents.

Beyond accepting UK COVID policies, respondents began to appreciate the value of individual freedom and civic liberty based on their experience in the UK. As Wanjun Zhu, a 26-year-old PhD student, noted, this understanding was a part of the "eye-opening" experiences that would not have been possible it they had not studied in the UK. Xiaochun Su, a 22-year-old master's student, explained:

What I experienced in the lockdowns here was much more humane than that of my friends and family back in China. I started to appreciate the UK approach. For instance, I could go out for a run every day, which is not possible if I were in China. I realized how important it is to have freedom to run and enjoy nature during this dark time. Is liberty less important than being alive? What is the point of being alive without liberty?

Many respondents expressed similar feelings, reflecting on the relationship between individuals and the state. While some still understood China's COVID rules as appropriate to that context, others were less convinced. Huixian Xia, a 24-year-old master's student, contrasted her medical experience in the UK with that of her cousin in China during their respective lockdowns.

Huixian, who has a long-term medical condition requiring regular examinations and medication, found her treatment unaffected by UK lockdowns. Her cousin, however, faced a starkly different situation. With "a suspicious tumour on her neck," the cousin travelled from Henan to Shanghai for treatment but was quarantined "indefinitely" without any medical attention. Huixian described her cousin's ordeal as "a near-death experience" and questioned, "did this top-down uniform lockdown really have no room for accommodating a person's urgent surgery? Is a person's life so worthless?" For Huixian, China's rules had come to seem "inhumane".

Some respondents discussed the role of the state in providing social security, comparing China and the UK. Xujun Liu, a 27-year-old PhD student, described the UK government's

furlong scheme (the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) "socialism": "It's what socialism would look like. It's what we learned in the textbooks in China. The government actually steps up and pays workers who could not work during the pandemic. It's unimaginable in China. The government pays you not to work? No way." Similarly, Ziyi Wu, a 25-year-old master's student, was extremely enthusiastic about the UK government's policies on "rent and mortgage holidays" and questioned the education she received about Western capitalism in China:

In school, we were told about western capitalist countries and exploitation. But these policies are so humane and caring. it's unimaginable in China. Chinese banks would never collect a fen less. The [Chinese] government would never hel[p] to cover the rent or mortgage during the time of the crisis. We all asked our families for help, not the state.

For Xujun and Ziyi, their lived experiences in the UK provided space to reassess the role of state welfare, or lack of thereof in creating good lives for citizens. Exposure to different types of policy provisions in terms of welfare and social security prompted these respondents to question the Chinese approach of authoritarian control without adequate social support in the pandemic.

Moreover, some students demonstrated an "awakening sense of social justice" through comparing the mass unemployment particularly of youth and migrant workers in China, to the UK government's social programs. As Xujun put it:

China is supposed to be a socialist country, but the government does not care about people losing their jobs. I have some friends who are recent graduates from university. They all lost their jobs almost overnight because of the lockdowns. Did the government help them? No. They asked their parents for help and they are all lying flat. How many migrant workers lost their jobs because of the COVID? Did the government help them? No. They were all kicked out and left to fend for themselves. They were blamed for being low quality population. It's socialism with Chinese characters.

For other respondents, the sense of social injustice during the pandemic in China hit closer to home when their family members became unemployed and life chances became precarious. These findings diverge from previous research on the patterns of political trust among the Chinese. While prior scholarship consistently demonstrates a high level of political trust in the state and unquestioned support for the Chinese Community party (Dickson et al., 2017; Huhe, 2014; Pye, 1999), our findings shed light on the impact of migration experiences on international students during the unsettled times of the pandemic. Studying in the UK provided new opportunities and unique spaces for the Chinese students to reconsider their political trust in the state. The Chinese state' authoritarian approaches during the pandemic were contrasted to a range of policy alternatives they observed in the UK, from emphasizing individual liberty and freedom to providing for social security. The migration experiences led international students to reassess these alternatives and develop a sense of social justice, a sensibility they attributed to their experience of studying in the UK.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Researching trust risks being extracted from the sites and processes of interactions between trustors and trustees if "doing trust" remains under-theorized. Furthermore, "doing trust" can be limited, especially when only one dimension of analysis—the micro, meso, or macro level, is applied. Instead, in this paper we seek to understand trust as an interactive social practice in the matrix of distrust. Drawing upon 70 in-depth individual interviews with Chinese international students who were pursuing postgraduate studies in the UK, we

analyzed the sites and processes of "doing trust" in the matrix of distrust during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have identified four main trust-relevant situations as sites of trust construction, ranging from micro-level of performing public health rituals and managing emotional well-being, to meso-level of learning during the pandemic, to the macro- level of making sense of COVID policies. Furthermore, we have unpacked the processes of trust construction through the interactions between trustors—Chinese international students—and trustees—those around them—at multidimensional levels. These processes of trust-building were embedded in the matrix of distrust in the pandemic.

This paper's findings have significant implications for the study of Chinese international students and trust more broadly. In particular, they underscore the need to theorize trust as an interactive social practice. Failure to do so could risk conceptualizing trust simply as an abstract act informed by one's value systems, obscuring the intricate interactions between trustors and specific trustees. This may lead to an overemphasis on the role of culture and values in influencing trust. Furthermore, failure to center trust in action in the conceptualization of trust may also risk generalizing experiences in shaping trust without contextualizing trust-relevant situations or specifying the sites and processes of trust construction. By recognizing trust as an interactive process, we can better capture the complex dynamics of trust building and contesting in diverse contexts.

How best to research trust remains an open question. Our findings on performing public health rituals resonate with prior research on mutual mistrust between Chinese international students and their host communities and destinations (Ji & Chen, 2023; Ma & Zhan, 2021). This study's findings also support scholarship on the role of trust in bridging and bonding social connections in ethnic diverse communities (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2015; Wu & Shi, 2020). Moreover, our findings on learning and managing mental well-being in the context of the pandemic support existing studies researching characteristics of particularized and generalized trust among Chinese (Dickson et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 1996; Pye, 1999), that is, in line with past research we found Chinese respondents had a high level of trust in individual families as well as in experts such as professors and professionals.

However, our research reveals the limitations of binary oppositions—trust versus distrust, high versus low trust or in-group versus out-group (dis)trust. The binary conceptualization risks an oversimplification of how trustors and trustees interact in specific trust-relevant situations and how their interactions might build trust relationships in unsettled times. We find that some respondents built bridging relationship between Chinese international students and non-Chinese through shared understanding of the importance of performing public health rituals. Failure to comply with the public health rituals caused rifts among the Chinese community. Likewise, our respondents developed trusting relationships with strangers who shared their hobbies such as K-pop dancing. Another factor complicating in-group trust was the lack of shared understanding of mental health between our respondents and their parents. In other words, trust building can overcome the boundaries of in-groups and out-groups based on familistic or ethnic characteristics. Meanwhile, trust contesting can also occur among in-group members due to a lack of shared understanding or beliefs in specific trust- relevant situations. Our findings on political trust provide new evidence on how the absolute trust in the Chinese state might shift when exposed to alternative political approaches in "unsettled times" like the pandemic.

Our study addresses these conceptual inadequacies by theorizing trust as an interactive social practice. Centering trust in action not only allows us to uncover the sites and processes of trust construction but also to systematically map out how trustors and trustees interact in

the matrix of trust-relevant situations. By specifying the matrix of distrust as well as unpacking the interactions between trustors and trustees, we could better understand how trust is built and how an act of trust responds to an act of trustworthiness. Equally important, understanding trust as an interactive social practice also provides us an analytical tool to amplify trustors' agency in building or contesting trust with trustees at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

Building on the insights of the current study, future scholarship on trust should take up several additional questions. First, what constitutes a trust-relevant situation? Second, how can we embed a life-course lens when researching trust as an interactive social construct? A longitudinal research design could allow for tracking the research population across life course transitions to the labor market, marriage and parenthood. By addressing these questions and refining our methodological approach, we can further advance our understanding of trust as an interactive social construct in different social contexts.

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