Old Boys' Power Illusion: Hometown Elites' Promotion and Political Trust

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Abstract

This paper introduces a novel psychological perspective to understand political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes, attributing it to the "power illusion" effect arising from hometown elites' promotion to national leadership. We argue that hometown elites' promotion enhances people' s political trust through psychological fulfillment and a power-sharing "as if they were me" illusion, particularly among individuals sharing demographic traits with these elites. Analyzing a panel data from China, following the 18th National Party Congress, which appointed China' s top leaders—Politburo members, we observe an increase in political trust among older males from these elites' hometowns. This increase in trust is not attributable to economic growth or improved government performance, but rather to a psychological fulfillment that boosts self-satisfaction, reduces perceived inequality, and elevates perceived social status. Interestingly, this "power illusion" effect is more pronounced among individuals who are not members of Chinese Communist Party, those employed outside the state-owned enterprises, and those less reliant on the Internet for information. We shed new light on the psychological channels that help authoritarian regimes maintain political legitimacy without democracy.

Keywords: political trust, political legitimacy, authoritarian, elite promotion, psychological fulfillment

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"*Proximity to power deludes some into thinking they wield it.*"-Frank Underwood, House of Cards

1 Introduction

Political trust, conceptualized as citizens' confidence that the political system, institutions, or actors will "do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny" (Miller, Arthur H. and Listhaug, 1990), serves as a crucial measure of regime legitimacy and reflects the extent to which governmental operations align with the normative expectations of its citizens. The absence of political trust poses risks such as reduced civic compliance with government orders (Salmon et al., 2009), resistance to governmental initiatives or security enhancements (Davis and Silver, 2003), and civil unrest or movements towards separatism (Miller, 1974), underscoring its vital role in political system efficacy and stability (Hutchison and Johnson, 2011; Marien and Hooghe, 2010). In authoritarian contexts like China, empirical studies revealed that Chinese government enjoys a robust degree of political trust from its populace, attributed to institutional performance and political culture (Huang et al., 2023; Li, 2013; Lu, 2014; Nicholson and Huang, 2023; Tang, 2005).The institutional performance perspective highlights political trust as a rational response to government efficiency, with economic growth and governance improvements as key factors (Hetherington, 2005; Lewis-Beck et al., 2013; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wang, 2005; Chen, 2004; Tang, 2005). Meanwhile, the political cultural perspective suggests that authoritarian orientations, symbolized by a respect for authority and political leaders deeply rooted in Confucian values, independently foster political trust (Shi, 2001; Tang, Wenfang, 2016; Zhai, 2018).

Acknowledging the significance of current institutional performance and cultural perspectives, this study introduces a novel psychological mechanism: the "power illusion" effect, arising from the promotion of hometown elites to national leadership roles, thereby enhancing local citizens' perceptions of political legitimacy. Historically, the millennia-old imperial governance and Confucian philosophies have cultivated a deep-seated respect for authority in China (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2022; Sun, 2015; Zhao, 2015), intensifying psychological admiration for power. On November 15, 2012, the 1st Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appointed 25 members to the Politburo, marking a significant transition in China' s leadership, predominantly consisting of older males. This study examines

how these elites' promotion influenced political trust among similar demographic groups, with a specific focus on older males from these elites' hometowns.

For empirical analysis, we use China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) panel data from 2012, 2014, and 2016. This crucial period includes the 18th National Party Congress in late 2012 and precedes the 19th National Party Congress in late 2017. The 18th National Congress is particularly significant for marking the power transition from General Secretary Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. Hence, we focus on the effects of the promotion of 25 politburo members in 18th National Congress, held on November 15, 2012, on local residents' political trust. We find a significant increase in political trust among residents from these promoted elites' birth cities, particularly among males aged 55 and above. This demographic closely mirrors the age and gender composition of China' s top leadership, which is primarily older males. We term this observed surge in political trust as "power illusion" or the "as if they were me" effect, highlighting a psychological channel that enhances political trust.

While exploring the potential mechanisms through which hometown elites' promotion increases citizens' level of political trust, we first find that the increase in political trust appears to be independent of economic growth and government performance. Notably, these elites' hometowns do not experience significant GDP increases post-promotion, nor do residents report enhanced satisfaction with government performance in employment, education, and environmental issues. Instead, our results identify a primarily psychological mechanism that enhances self-satisfaction, reduces perceptions of inequality, and elevates perceived social status. Moreover, this impact varies across different demographic groups, with stronger impacts observed among non-CCP members, individuals not working in state-owned enterprises, those with children, and individuals who do not primarily use the internet as their information source. These results, supported by rigorous robustness checks, highlight the unique "power illusion" mechanism of political legitimacy.

This study makes theoretical contributions to multiple strands of literature. First and foremost, it enriches the literature by highlighting the role of psychological factors in affecting political trust. The prevailing researches predominantly associate political trust with evaluations of government performance, suggesting that trust fluctuates based on government performance (Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington, Marc J. and Husser, 2012; Mishler and Rose, 2001). Challenging this institutional performance perspective, this study introduces a novel psychological perspective to explain the high level of political trust in authoritarian regimes (Huang et al., 2023; Li, 2013; Nicholson

and Huang, 2023; Shi, 2001; Tang, 2005). Drawing insights from political psychology, we identify the psychological fulfillment and perceptions of equity stemming from hometown elites' promotion (Bruce and Wilcox, 2000; Cichocka et al., 2023; Marcus, 2002), which contribute to "power illusion" effect that enhances political trust.

Second, this study advances the understanding of political legitimacy in authoritarian contexts, challenging the conventional wisdom that such regimes inherently lack legitimacy. Notably, despite the absence of democratic elections, the Chinese government's legitimacy is robust, as evidenced by survey outcomes indicating broad governmental trust, even after correcting for bias (Li, 2013; Nicholson and Huang, 2023; Shi, 2001). A significant majority of Chinese citizens deem their political system suitable for their nation, resulting in many debates among scholars. For example, contrary to Max Weber's three ideal types of legitimate authority, China leverages three sources of nondemocratic legitimacy: performance, political meritocracy, and nationalism (Bell, 2016). Our findings illustrate a novel psychology mechanism: societies emphasizing hierarchy, obligations, and a collective mindset may cultivate a deep-seated obsession with power among individuals in authoritarian regimes (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2022; Sun, 2015; Zhao, 2015). This cultural foundation enhances admiration for promoted hometown elites, generating a "power illusion" among the citizenry. Our study suggests the "power illusion" effect is particularly pronounced in East Asian societies shaped by Confucian political philosophy that favor hierarchy and obligations over equality and rights. The inherent hierarchical values, emphasizing benevolence and loyalty between ruler and subject, advocating for elitist or potentially autocratic governance, thereby shaping the perception of political legitimacy.

Furthermore, this study expands the political representation theory, arguing that elites' promotion notably affects perceptions of political representation and trust, particularly when there is demographic alignment between the populace and officials in terms of age, gender, and origin (Franceschet et al., 2024; Gay, 2001; Mansbridge, 1999). In democratic context, this alignment is thought to enable officials to better understand local conditions and represent their constituents effectively, thus enhancing public trust in the government. However, our findings indicate that in authoritarian regimes, this sense of "representation" fosters a "power illusion." By making these contributions, this study not only introduces a novel psychological mechanism of political trust but also challenges established theories by offering a framework that integrates cultural, psychological, and representational elements in understanding

political trust.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the pivotal role of psychological factors in influencing political trust and outlines the hypotheses tested in this study. Section 3 introduces the institutional background of China's power structure and its top leadership. Section 4 describes the econometric methods and data used for analysis. Section 5 details the baseline estimates, mechanisms, and heterogeneity analysis. Section 6 concludes by reflecting on the study's implications.

2 Psychological Roots of Political Trust

Individuals' trust in their government is embedded in the moral obligations, values, and norms derived from different cultural contexts (Shi, 2001), and people with a particular set of value orientations tend to have a higher level of political trust regardless of the actual performance of political institutions and incumbent politicians. In the context of China, political leaders and governments occupy an important symbolic authoritative status in Chinese traditional society, and the worship for power deeply influences their political trust. The millennia-old imperial system, centralized governance, and the cultural norms shaped by Confucian and Legalist philosophies have cultivated a deep-seated respect for authority (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2022; Sun, 2015; Zhao, 2015), promoting the notion that social status is intrinsically linked to one' s power. This veneration of power not only idealizes and legitimizes authority but also fosters an intense admiration and respect for it, especially among men. In modern times, this cultural legacy continues to resonate, with governmental positions often viewed as more prestigious than those in other sectors, fueling a craze for civil servant jobs (Ko and Han, 2013; Liu, 2023).

Additionally, Confucian ideals encourage a collectivist mindset over an individualist one, which has a further profound effect on political trust (Zhai, 2018). Collectivism amplifies the sensation of "I feel as if they were me" power illusion, leading individuals to feel a connection with elites who hail from the same locality, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging to a unified group. The promotion of local elites thus becomes a source of pride for their community.

Also, we propose an alternative theoretical framework based on political representation theory, which we believe offers a more comprehensive understanding of these phenomena. The essence of political representation lies in the relationship between representatives and their constituents, focusing on how individuals feel their

interests and identities are mirrored in political life. Prior studies reveal that some citizens feel alienated or disempowered because they face a political reality that excludes them from exerting influence on the governmental process (Abramson, 1972; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Howell and Fagan, 1988). As Mansbridge (1999) argues, descriptive representation can "forge bonds of trust" between representative and constituent, which enhance the feeling of inclusion and make the polity democratically more legitimate in one' s eyes (Mansbridge, 1999). Personal attributes may help constituents determine policy concerns they share with their representatives, and beliefs about common interests can help establish trust in the member-constituent relationship (Gay, 2001). Furthermore, descriptive representation, or the extent to which representatives physically or demographically resemble their constituents, can enhance perceptions of accessibility and effective communication (Fenno, 1978), laying the groundwork for increased trust in public officials and institutions (Mansbridge, 1999). This phenomenon is not exclusive to democratic systems; it is also observable in authoritarian contexts.

In the context of China, despite the National and Local People' s Congresses serving as legislative bodies and their members ostensibly representing the populace, the electoral process for these institutions is tightly controlled by the Party. The representatives are predominantly appointed by the Party rather than elected by the citizenry (Yuan, 2011). Within this framework, Party secretaries and governors emerge as the de facto nexus of power, overshadowing the elected representatives in terms of public interest and influence. Thus, the populace places greater significance on the turnover of these key positions than on the electoral process of representatives. It is understandable that the promotion of local secretaries and governors plays a role in shaping perceptions of political representation and trust. The advancement of hometown elites is likely to enhance feelings of empowerment among the populace who come from the same place and foster a sense of policy responsiveness. It is on the belief that a shared background, such as a common hometown and age, fosters alignment between the officials' and the citizens' perspectives, thereby enabling officials to better understand local conditions and represent the local people more effectively.

Moreover, the demographic similarities between elites and individuals, such as age, gender, and place of origin, increase a sense of group honor and, by extension, political trust. Research on gender and politics reveals that politics is often seen as a sphere dominated by men, leading to women demonstrating lower levels of political interest, awareness, and efficacy compared to men (Verba et al., 1997). Specifically

in the Chinese context, the traditional political culture greatly impacts women' s political knowledge, interest and participation (Tong, 2003), thereby resulting in female political indifference. Given the fact that the officials promoted within the Chinese political system are predominantly middle-aged or elderly men (Fu et al., 2018; Su, 2006), we propose Hypothesis 1:

H1: When local elites are promoted to national leadership positions, the political trust towards the government among older males from their hometowns increases.

Secondly, research on political psychology provides some insights on psychological underpinnings that influence people's trust in government following the promotion of political elites. Given the omnipresence of emotion in human life, contemporary political science acknowledges that emotions play a crucial and, indeed, beneficial role in shaping political attitudes and behaviors (Bruce and Wilcox, 2000; Marcus, 2002), emphasizing that political citizens are inherently emotional beings. It can be further argued that political trust is a result of the emotional engagements of citizens. Indeed, it has been recognized that political trust encompasses two distinct dimensions: evaluative and affective. The latter is closely aligned with the cultural approach, highlighting the cultural effect of internalized norms or sentiments about politicians or political institutions (Lægreid and Christensen, 2005). Our analysis aligns with the affective dimension, therefore offering a nuanced comprehension of the psychological mechanisms at play. Previous psychological model suggests that perceptions of government trustworthiness—including assessments of ability, benevolence, and integrity—are mediated by institutional and cultural factors through psychological processes (Hamm et al., 2019). For instance, many have argued that consistency with previous attitudes (Hetherington, Marc J. and Husser, 2012) or salient identities (Taber and Lodge, 2006) may trigger motivational processes such that when the attitudes and identities of those in power match their own, individuals are more likely to be unpersuaded by negative performance and more likely to be persuaded by positive performance. In this analysis, therefore, we posit that enhanced political trust stems from attributions of trustworthiness, wherein shared characteristics between local citizens and political elites, such as birthplaces and age, make the promotion of elites a stronger signal of trustworthiness than in the absence of such commonalities.

Further, we argue that the sense of fairness and self-satisfaction are crucial psychological elements influencing political trust. This assertion is supported by the concept that perceived social mobility—the belief in the feasibility of ascending the

social ladder through individual effort—affects political trust (Liu, 2023). Perceived social mobility legitimizes the current socio-political order by attributing outcomes to personal agency, thereby instilling a sense of fairness. It diminishes the impact of innate characteristics such as gender or ethnicity on one' s prospects, leading to a more positive assessment of the political system and, consequently, increased political trust. Moreover, this perception engenders optimism, diverging from institutional theories that prioritize rational evaluations of a political regime's performance, by fostering confidence in future achievements. In the case under consideration, even though the primary beneficiaries of social mobility and individual initiative are government officials rather than the general populace, people may still perceive a sense of fairness and optimism in the political system when they see officials from hometown obtain promotion, which contribute to enhancing political trust. Specifically, the promotion of local elites can mitigate perceptions of inequality and boost individuals' perceived social standing, thereby augmenting their political trust. Following this logic, we hypothesize that:

H2-a: Following the promotion of hometown elites, the older males' perception of social inequality decreases, leading to an elevated sense of social status, which ultimately enhances political trust.

When it comes to feelings of self-worth matter for politics, it has been one of the classic issues in political psychology (McClosky, 1958; Sniderman and Citrin, 1971). In his study of democratic politics, (Sniderman, 1975) argued that individuals' self-evaluation lies "at or near the center of the personality system. It appears to be bound up with our most central needs and values, our conception of ourselves and others, our aspirations and our actions." Self-esteem reflects inherent satisfaction with oneself, and having high self-esteem means feeling adequate and satisfied with oneself (Rosenberg, 1962). A vast literature has also probed the role of self-esteem in predicting attitudes towards various social groups. Early insights from social identity theory (SIT) linked feelings of self-worth to intra–and intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1978). According to this classic theorizing, individuals derive their self-worth partly from group belongingness and intergroup comparisons. Social comparisons that let people positively distinguish in-group from out-groups are thought to result in positive social identification - the emotional significance one attaches to the in-group and its members (Leach et al., 2008; Tajfel, 1978). Hence, by and large, people show ingroup favoritism: They prefer members of their in-group over members of other social groups (Cichocka et al., 2023). In this case, therefore, in-group favoritism leads to a greater

preference for local elites with promotion as it satisfies their self-esteem and sense of self-worth, ultimately resulting in their increased political trust in government. Hence, we propose Hypothesis 2-b:

H2-b: Following the promotion of hometown elites, the older males' self-satisfaction increases, which ultimately enhances political trust.

Thirdly, this study advances the discourse by critically evaluating the institutional performance theory and the political awareness explanation. The institutional performance perspective focuses on trust as a rational response to governmental performance (Hetherington, 2005; Lewis-Beck et al., 2013; Mishler and Rose, 2001). This encompasses both economic outcomes and governance quality. Remarkable economic growths improve the average Chinese individuals' well-being, and Chinese authorities build political trust among the masses based on economic prosperity (Wang, 2005; Chen, 2004; Tang, 2005). Cross-country panel data analysis reveals that regions native to current political leaders often exhibit superior economic outcomes, a phenomenon known as "regional favoritism" (Hodler and Raschky, 2014). However, we argue that public satisfaction with government remains unchanged as there is no direct linkage between elites' promotions and regional GDP growth. In China, while economic performance is a key factor for the promotion of local leaders at the provincial level (Li and Zhou, 2005), the importance of economic achievements for promotion is more critical at lower levels of government administration (Landry et al., 2018). Elites' promotions to national leadership roles are not directly correlated with their performance in these specific policy domains. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3: The enhancement of political trust is not due to an increase in satisfaction with the government, thus it is not a result of improved performance in economic growth.

3 China's Game of Thrones

In contrast to democratic systems where leaders are elected, the Chinese leaders are selected (Manion, 2023). At the heart of this process is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which stands as the pivotal force in China' s political structure. This supremacy is institutionalized in the 1982 Chinese Constitution, which labels China as a "people' s democratic dictatorship" under CCP leadership. The party' s organizational structure includes a five-yearly cycle where local party committees nominate 2,300 delegates for the Party Congress. These delegates are responsible

for electing the Central Committee, which consists of nearly 200 members. The Central Committee, in turn, selects the Politburo (24-25 members) and its Standing Committee (7-9 members), which represents the apex of the party hierarchy, led by the General Secretary.

In short, the General Secretary of CCP occupies a central role, the Party' s Standing Committee and Politburo collectively decides on major issues through consensus. Additionally, elected every five years, the 3,000-member National People' s Congress (NPC) holds the authority to modify the Constitution, legislate, and fill pivotal state roles, including appointments to the State Council, Prime Minister, President, Central Military Commission, and judiciary (see Figure 1). This hierarchical electoral system, initiating at the grassroots and culminating with the NPC, seemingly engages voters. Yet, the CCP significantly influences this process, maintaining tight control over leadership choices and critical state decisions, effectively excluding the general populace from meaningful participation in the selection process.

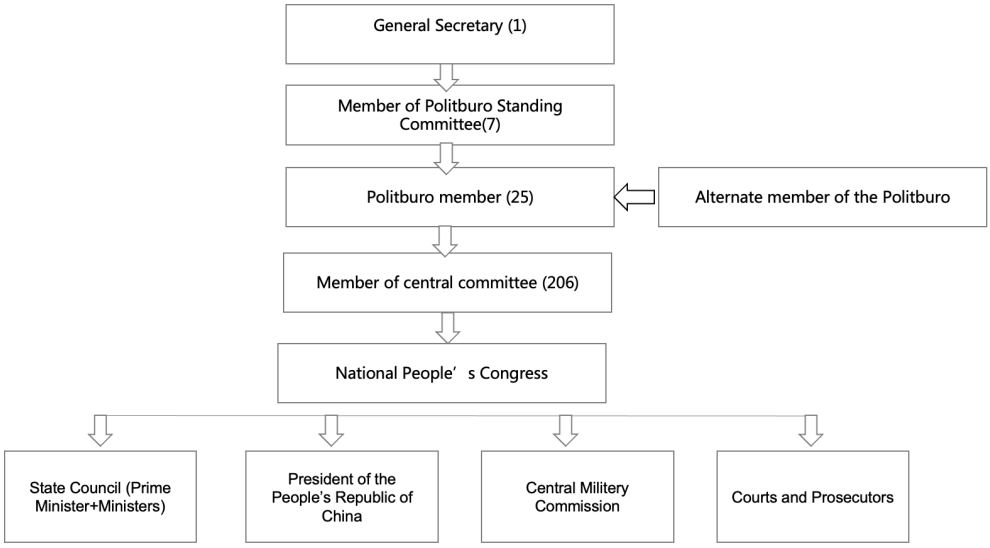

Figure 1. Power Structure in the People's Republic of China

Note: This figure illustrates the hierarchical organization of the political system as established by the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the First Plenary Session held on November 15, 2012. The numbers in parentheses next to each level indicate the number of individuals occupying that particular position. At the apex is the General Secretary, who is the highest-ranking official. The General Secretary is part of the Politburo Standing Committee, which consists of seven members and functions as the country's most powerful decision-making body.

The Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee are the top decision-

making institutions for the CCP Central Committee, acting as the central leadership organ of the CCP. They play a critical role in ensuring compliance with party policies and directly oversee major institutions such as the State Council, the Central Military Commission, and the National People' s Congress. Additionally, the system includes alternate members who can step into the Central Committee in case of vacancies, based on their vote count. However, these alternates can attend and speak at plenary sessions but do not possess voting rights or the ability to participate in elections or decision-making processes, clearly differentiating them from full members. The Central Committee, ranking just below the Politburo in the CCP' s power hierarchy, holds the party' s highest authority, especially when the National Congress is not in session. Its members include senior officials such as provincial governors, government ministers, and military leaders. Since the 1980s, the composition of the Central Committee has become more stable, with provincial governors and party secretaries typically securing membership. Within the power structure, city party secretaries hold substantial roles at the city level. They are key players in the political arena, often viewed as the next rung on the career ladder, especially within the provincial context. Success in this role requires robust backing from provincial leadership, leading City Party Secretaries to closely adhere to the directives and policies set by the provincial government. Their influence is regional, limited to their cities, unlike Central Committee members or higher ranks who have national power.

In China, the General Secretary and the Politburo Standing Committee are recognized by the public as the highest levels of authority. Those with a keen interest in politics may also know the Politburo members. However, Central Committee members lacking roles as provincial party secretaries or governors have much lower public visibility. High-profile leaders frequently appear on state media platforms like "Xinwen Lianbo" and "Renmin Ribao" , underscoring their national prominence. In contrast, Central Committee members, and even more so city party secretaries, receive limited national media exposure.

Another fact that should be noted is that China' s top leadership is predominantly older males. For instance, the average age of members in the 18th Politburo Standing Committee was 61.16 years, as detailed in Appendix Table A1. Exceptions like Sun Zhengcai and Hu Chunhua, who were both 49 at their time of appointment, stood out as the youngest, with the next youngest group aged 55. The Politburo' s gender composition has been overwhelmingly male. Over the past 70 years, only six women have served on the Politburo. From the 16th National Congress of the

CCP, there was a continuous presence of at least one woman in each Politburo until the 20th National Congress in 2022, where no women were included. Thus, China' s highest power throne are mainly occupied by men, typically aged between 55 and 70 years.

4 Method and Data

Empirical Strategy

Our study explores the impact of local elites' promotion to Politburo Committee on political trust among their hometown residents. We estimate the following model:

$$Trust_{ict} = \beta BecomeLeader_{ct} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{ict} \tag{1}$$

In this model, the independent variable $BecomeLeader_{ct}$ is a dummy indicator denoting where an elite originating from city c has been promoted to Politburo Committee. The dependent variable $Trust_{ict}$ measures the political trust reported by respondent i from city c in the year t. To account for unobserved heterogeneity that may influence political trust, our model incorporates individual fixed effects, thereby controlling for time-invariant personal characteristics. Additionally, to adjust for national-level shocks and trends affecting all respondents equally in any given year, we include year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level.

Our hypothesis suggests that the coefficient β will be positive, reflecting a boost in political trust among respondents when a local elite rises to a national leadership role. A positive and significant β would empirically reinforce the "as if they were me" power illusion effect, suggesting that political leader promotions from certain locales directly enhance political trust among residents in those areas.

Our interpretation of a positive β based on the assumption that elite promotion is the primary driver of enhanced political trust in the elite' s birth city. Considering that national leaders are more often selected than elected, as well as the alterations in political leadership in China predominantly follow five-year political turnovers, the event of becoming a leader region is relatively exogenous. In this context, the political trust of the populace is unlikely to influence elite promotions—higher trust does not increase the likelihood of local elites rising to national leaders, mitigating concerns of reverse causality. Furthermore, by incorporating individual fixed effects, our model

mitigates the impact of time-invariant individual differences on β, ensuring β is not confounded by these factors. Consequently, our analysis posits that increased political trust in leader regions primarily reflects the influence of elites' promotion.

Further, to assess whether the rise in political trust is due to hometown elites' promotion to national leadership and not the economic growth they might deliver, we estimate an alternative model that specifically addresses the Hypothesis 3:

$$GDP_{ct} = \beta_1 BecomeLeader_{ct} + \alpha_c + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{ct} \tag{2}$$

In this alternative model, the dependent variable is the GDP of city c in year t. If β_1 is not positively significant, it suggests that the increase in political trust can be disentangled from the economic growth potentially brought about by the elites (Hodler and Raschky, 2014). This provides a clearer verification of the "power illusion" hypothesis, isolating the effect of elite promotion on political trust.

Data

We employ a panel data derived from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), which is a nationally representative survey started in 2010 by the Institution of Social Science Survey (ISSS) at Peking University (Xie and Hu, 2014). The CFPS survey follows a rigorous multistage probability sampling procedure, including 162 counties across 25 provinces that collectively represent approximately 95 percent of China' s total population. In addition, the CFPS provides rich information on the demographic information, interview timing, and city of residence for each respondent, enabling us to match them with city-level socioeconomic characteristics, as well as to indicate whether the respondents are surveyed before and after the "elite promotion" after 2012. Among the 128 cities examined, 16 (representing 12.5%) were identified as leader regions (see Figure 2). Our research leverages data spanning three waves of the CFPS survey, conducted in 2012, 2014, and 2016. This crucial period encompasses the 18th National Party Congress in late 2012 and precedes the 19th National Party Congress in late 2017, both pivotal for elite promotions for China. However, the 18th National Congress is particularly significant for marking the power transition from General Secretary Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. Hence, our analysis specifically targets the effects of the 18th National Congress, held on November 15, 2012, on residents' political trust.

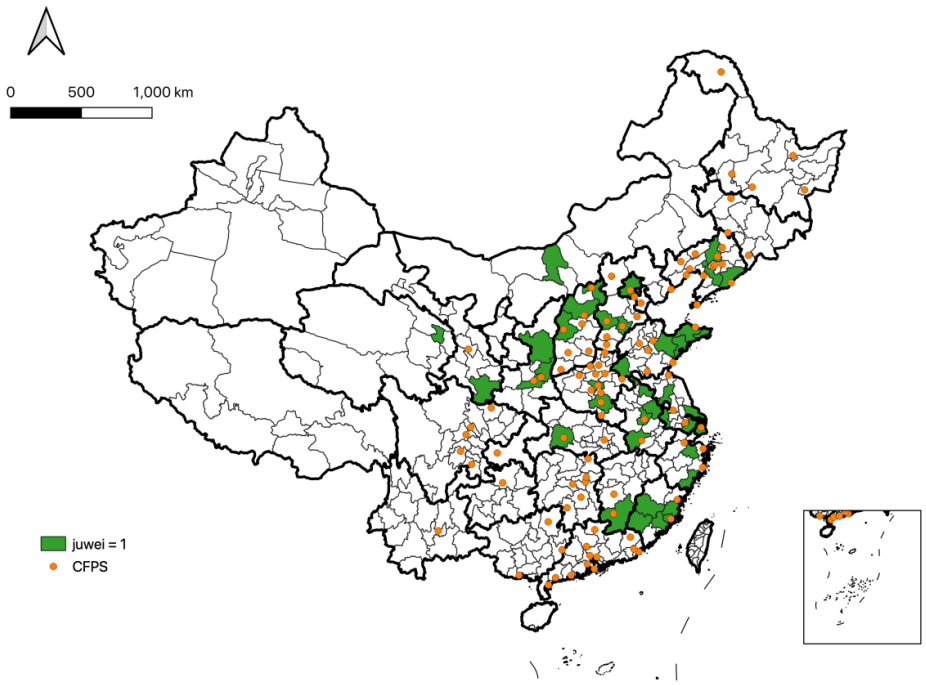

Figure 2. The distribution of promoted elites' hometowns

Note: The green areas represents Politburo Committee members' hometown (Juwei means "局委" in Chinese). The dots represent the cities where respondents participating in CFPS.

Dependent Variable

Since the 2012 wave, the CFPS survey started to include a question about respondent's political trust towards local officials and this is our core dependent variable.

Political trust in China is a concept inherently multifaceted, including at least two distinct dimensions: trust in the central government and trust in local governments. The existing literature illustrates a consistent pattern within the Chinese context, where trust in the central government is generally high, while trust in local governments varies significantly (Chen, 2017; Shi, 2001). To address these issues and mitigate the concern of self-censorship, the question reads "To what extent do you disagree or agree with the statement: Overall, I trust local officials?" CFPS survey included a note specifying that the "local cadres" mentioned in the questions refer to county-level officials. By doing so, respondents are more comfortable providing honest assessments of their trust in local officials. Respondents were required to rate on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 denotes completely disagree and 10 denotes completely agree. Previous studies have also used this indicator to measure political trust (Chen

et al., 2023; Sha, 2022; Yao et al., 2022).

In addition to political trust, we incorporate other attitudinal indicators into our empirical analysis. First, we include respondents' satisfaction with the performance of local governments. The original question is "What is your overall assessment of the work of local government last year?"A 5-point scale is used to measure the satisfaction. Second, we incorporate variables on how respondents' awareness regarding various social issues. The original questions in survey are: How serious do you think the problem of education/environment/employment/health/healthcare/inequality issue is in our country? A 11-point scale is used for these questions. Finally, we consider the respondents' perception of social status and self-satisfaction. The original question is: (1) What is your family' s social status in the local? (2) How satisfied are you with your life? A 5-point scale is used to measure these perceptions. By including these alternative attitudes in our analysis, we are able to examine potential psychological channels.

Independent Variable

We conducted a detailed collection of the hometowns of political leaders promoted during China' s 18th National Congress, drawing from BaiduBaike and ChinaVitae for publicly available curriculum vitae of Chinese government officials. Our dataset, detailed in Table A1, includes extensive information on their birthplace and demographic characteristics, such as age, educational background, gender, ethnicity, and professional experience. This information was verified across several internet sources. We identify 'leader regions' as the birthplaces of the political leaders, generating a dummy variable that is set to 1 if a region was a leader region in a given year, and 0 otherwise.

Since the 18th National Congress concluded on November 14, 2012, and our analysis utilizes data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) for the years 2012, 2014, and 2016. Notably, the survey work of the 2012 wave started in June 2012, allowing us to categorize 2012 as pre-policy period and 2014 and 2016 as the post-policy period. Consequently, respondents from cities recognized in Table A1 are designated a treatment dummy of 1 for the period following 2012. Our analysis reveals that over the sample period, 16 out of 128 cities, or just over 12.5%, qualified as leader regions.

Control Variables

We use control variables on two levels. The first level is city-level socioeconomic variables that vary over time, including gross domestic product (GDP), population, and fiscal expenditure, sourced from the China City Yearbook. Additionally, we control for time-varying personal characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, age, urban or rural residence, education level, work status, marriage status, household income, etc. While these variables do not directly influence the elite promotion, they do affect political trust of the respondents. Therefore, by including them, we enhance the robustness of our model.

Finally, based on respondents' interview cities and dates, we merge the independent variables (leader region) and city-level control variables into the CFPS data. We mainly focus on the male sample. We drop observations that have missing values for political trust, our core dependent variable and finally establish an unbalanced panel with 43,580 observations. The summary statistics are shown in Appendix Table A2. According to the summary statistics, the political trust has an average of 4.92, which is similar to related research (Chen et al., 2023; Sha, 2022). The average age is 46.4 years old, and 83.1% of respondents are married. The average years of schooling are 8.43, and the average annual income per capita is about 48,378.623 Chinese Yuan (6686.56 US dollars), all of which fall within reasonable ranges.

5 Results

Effects of "old boys' power illusion"

As mentioned previously, the Politburo is mainly occupied by men, typically aged between 55 and 70 years. We report the regression results of our baseline model in Table 1, focusing on a subsample of males aged 55 and older. By gradually including control variables across columns, we observe minimal fluctuations in β estimates. This implies a limited impact of both observed and unobserved confounding variables on our model. Notably, column 3 of Table 1 reveals a significant "old boys' power illusion" effect, where hometown elites' promotion to national leadership correlates with a statistically significant increase in political trust among residents by 0.259 units, demonstrating statistical significance at the 5% level.

Our analysis further investigate the age-heterogeneous "power illusion" effect, examining whether this phenomenon is exclusively observed among older males. By

Table 1. hometown elite promotion and political trust for men older than 55

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dependent variable	Political trust (0-10)		
	age>55	age>55	age>55
Become leader	0.254**	0.247**	0.259**
	(0.119)	(0.119)	(0.120)
Individual Controls	×	✓	✓
City controls	×	×	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓
N	12232	12232	12232
adj. R2	0.3568	0.3569	0.3569
DV mean	5.402693	5.402693	5.402693

*Note: Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

categorizing male respondents into four age cohorts, our empirical findings, as shown in Table 2, shed light on the differential impact of elite promotion on political trust across age cohorts among male respondents. Specifically, for younger males, as outlined in Columns 2-4, the effect of elite promotion on political trust is negligible and at times even negative, though lacking statistical significance. In stark contrast, for older males, represented in Column 5, a significant "power illusion" effect is observed. This effect demonstrates the importance of demographic similarities with national leaders in shaping political trust among older males. Consequently, these results robustly support Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that the "power illusion" effect is predominantly observed in older males, informally known as "old boys," who harbor a fantasy about possessing power—a power they have never actually attained.

We acknowledge that intuitively, the promotion of hometown elites to the central government might boost trust towards the central authority, yet this variable is not available in CFPS survey. Our dependent variable is political trust towards local officials, which still yields key insights since it is an indicator for political legitimacy. We propose the "power illusion" effect, where connections to central government elites may indirectly enhance local government trust through increased perceptions of political legitimacy as a whole. Therefore, our analysis suggests that elite promotion

Table 2. hometown elite promotion and political trust for men of all age groups

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Political trust (0-10)				
	full-sample	<25	25-40	40-55	>55
Become leader	0.033	-0.214	-0.03	-0.157	0.259**
	(0.073)	(0.256)	(0.162)	(0.133)	(0.120)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37683	3608	7473	11532	12232
adj. R2	0.3723	0.3258	0.3557	0.3825	0.3569
DV mean	4.92	4.83954	4.460279	4.778635	5.402693

*Note: Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

enhances trust in all government levels, providing insight into the psychological impact of such promotions on political trust and legitimacy.

Moreover, we consider promotions to the Central Committee, a rank second to that of Politburo members, if similar effects are observable. The results are detailed in Appendix Table A5. Contrary to the results of Politburo members' promotion, Central Committee members' promotions do not yield similar effects. This discrepancy is likely attributable to the lower public profile of Central Committee members. The primary state media broadcast, "Xinwen Lianbo," predominantly features Politburo members, particularly the General Secretaries, while Central Committee members receive less attention. Thus, unless an individual is particularly attuned to political developments, the general populace may not be as responsive to these promotions. This aligns with our theoretical framework that the illusion of power and the consequent political trust arise from the public' s admiration for prominently powerful figures, further substantiating our argument concerning the psychological impact of perceived power.

Additionally, we conduct several robustness checks (Appendix Table A3). First, we adjust age groups to spans of 15 years, and we still see significant positive coefficient for males older than 60, further support our baseline results (panel A). Second,

we alter the clustering from individual to household level (panel B). Third, we include province by year fixed effects and find that does not change our results (panel C). Finally, we exclude respondents from Beijing and Shanghai, cities with unique administrative status in China, the outcomes stay consistent across all specifications. Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Mechanism Analysis

In this section, we detail analyses to uncover the mechanisms behind the effect of hometown elites' promotion on local citizens' level of political trust, focusing on economic growth, government performance perception, and psychological fulfillment.

Promotion of hometown elites to the central government raises the question of whether it enhances economic growth in their birth regions (Hodler and Raschky, 2014). Institutional performance emerges as critical determinants of political trust, with economic prosperity and governance efficacy enhancing trust. If the promotion of hometown elites leads to economic advancement in their regions, surpassing that of regions without such leaders, it logically boosts political trust among the leader-region residents. This increase in political trust stems from the direct economic benefits derived from the elite' s promotion, thereby rewarding the government for the economic development.

We test this hypothesis in Table 3, in which we observe that the promotion of hometown elites does not positively correlate with city-level GDP, GDP per capita, and fiscal revenue (log); in fact, the association is non-significant or even negative. These results challenge our hypothesis regarding the economic channel. Contrary to cross-country findings, it appears that national leaders may face difficulties in boosting economic prosperity in their hometowns following their promotion. As mentioned before, economic success significantly influences local leader promotions in China, with its importance escalating at lower administrative levels (Li and Zhou, 2005; Landry et al., 2018). Despite this, central government discourages exploiting hometown ties for promotion, urging provincial leaders to avoid such hometown favoritism(Cao et al., 2023). Consequently, national leaders might lack significant incentives to prioritize economic growth, given their political survival does not heavily depend on it. Therefore, the observed increase in political trust does not stem from significantly better economic outcomes in leader-regions post-promotion of hometown elites. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Next, we examine the role of perceived government performance as a potential

Table 3. Mechanism analysis 1: economic performance

	(1) ln_city_gdp	(2) ln_city_pgdp	(3) ln_city_rev
Become leader	-0.046	-0.055*	-0.068
	(0.033)	(0.031)	(0.065)
City FE	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓
N	43580	43580	43580
adj. R2	0.9943	0.9804	0.9897

*Note: Dependent variables in column 1-3 are city-level GDP, GDP per capita and fiscal revenue (all logged). Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

mechanism. The bulk of political trust research traditionally centers on evaluations of government performance, suggesting that fluctuations in government performance directly influence trust levels. Theoretically, the promotion of hometown elites could enhance public perceptions of government performance, thereby boosting political trust. However, using government satisfaction as dependent variable in the baseline model yields no significant results (Table 4). We further investigate whether hometown elite promotion effectively raises public awareness of critical life aspects such as environment, education, employment, and healthcare. Findings in Table 5 suggest that the increase in political trust is not linked to heightened public awareness on social issues. Thus, the observed elevation in political trust does not stem from better government performance or economic development, suggesting alternative underlying mechanisms.

Finally, we investigate whether the increase in political trust through psychological fulfillment. We argue that the promotion of hometown elites could indirectly enhance political trust by positively influencing residents' perceptions of their quality of life and mental health. Specifically, in authoritarian contexts like China' s, where a long-distance power structure prevails and a hierarchical admiration for power exists, the promotion of hometown elites—who represent the most powerful individuals in the country—can create a power illusion among the public. This illusion decreases their perceptions of inequality, while also elevating their perceived social status. Table 6 shows a significant decrease in perceived inequality and an enhanced perception of household social status among older men, which supports Hypothesis 2-a.

Moreover, we propose that the illusion of power also boosts individuals' mental

Table 4. Mechanism analysis 2: government satisfaction does not increase

	(1) full-sample	(2) <25	(3) 25-40	(4) 40-55	(5) >55
Become leader	0.054	0.249	0.176	-0.040	-0.035
	(0.069)	(0.242)	(0.160)	(0.129)	(0.114)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	36407	3544	7337	11201	11613
adj. R2	0.2753	0.2308	0.2783	0.2863	0.2620

*Note: The original question is "What is your overall assessment of the work of local government last year?" A 5-point scale is used to measure the satisfaction. Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

health level and self-satisfaction. The CFPS utilizes the Kessler 6 (K6) Psychological Distress Scale for measuring symptoms of depression and distress Kessler et al. (2003). This scale, consisting of six questions, yields a score range from 0 to 24, where higher scores signal more acute mental health issues. Mental health severity is categorized into mild (K6 $\geq$ 4), moderate (K6 $\geq$ 8), and severe (K6 $\geq$ 13) depression. Our findings, detailed in Appendix Table A4, indicate that elites' promotion have no significant effect on mental health levels across these categories (Columns 1-4). However, when analyzing happiness and life satisfaction as dependent outcomes (Columns 5 and 6), we discover a marked increase in self-satisfaction associated with elite promotions (Column 6). These results highlight the significant role of psychological fulfillment as a mechanism influencing political trust. Hypothesis 2-b is supported.

In summary, we find that such promotions do not directly catalyze local economic growth or substantial enhancements in public welfare. The increase in political trust towards the government is not a consequence of any economic growth or enhanced political awareness attributed to officials' promotions. Instead, it stems from an increased sense of psychological fulfillment among individuals.

Table 5. Mechanism analysis 2: perception on social issues does not increase

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Panel A: education	Full-sample	<25	25-40	40-55	>55
Become leader	0.139	0.360	0.084	0.207	0.065
	(0.087)	(0.271)	(0.194)	(0.155)	(0.155)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37085	3598	7461	11387	11887
adj. R2	0.2327	0.2121	0.2245	0.2282	0.1689
Panel B: environment	Full-sample	<25	25-40	40-55	>55
Become leader	0.094	0.179	0.325*	0.111	-0.212
	(0.083)	(0.242)	(0.188)	(0.151)	(0.149)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37222	3602	7466	11447	11947
adj. R2	0.2776	0.2612	0.2638	0.2443	0.2197
Panel C: employment	Full-sample	<25	25-40	40-55	>55
Become leader	0.022	0.032	0.150	0.060	-0.164
	(0.080)	(0.226)	(0.178)	(0.148)	(0.139)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	36830	3592	7445	11381	11666
adj. R2	0.2331	0.2310	0.2237	0.2229	0.1757
Panel D: healthcare	Full-sample	<25	25-40	40-55	>55
Become leader	0.085	0.111	0.037	0.069	0.022
	(0.088)	(0.265)	(0.198)	(0.159)	(0.157)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37337	3597	7466	11446	12036
adj. R2	0.2204	0.2127	0.2181	0.2155	0.1696

*Note: The original questions in survey are: How serious do you think the problem of education/environment/employment/health/medication issue is in our country? A 11-point scale is used for these questions. Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

Table 6. Mechanism analysis 3: decreased inequality perception and increased household social status

Panel A: inequality	(1) Full-sample	(2) <25	(3) 25-40	(4) 40-55	(5) >55
Become leader	-0.107	0.068	-0.206	0.104	-0.316**
	(0.079)	(0.268)	(0.178)	(0.139)	(0.138)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37238	3600	7456	11442	11952
adj. R2	0.2322	0.2138	0.2256	0.2226	0.2181
Panel B: home status					
Become leader	0.056*	-0.051	-0.005	0.017	0.150***
	(0.032)	(0.094)	(0.064)	(0.054)	(0.055)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	21896	1920	4554	7302	8120
adj. R2	0.3137	0.3702	0.3003	0.3223	0.2993

*Note: The original questions in survey are: (1) How serious do you think the problem of inequality issue is in our country? A 11-point scale is used for these questions. (2) What is your family' s social status in the local? A 5-point scale is used to measure these perceptions. Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

Heterogeneity

Building on our findings of a strong causal link between elites' promotion and political trust, we now investigate the differential impact across various demographic cohorts. Prior studies have identified age, education, and social identity as critical factors of political trust (Citrin and Laura, 2018; Hakhverdian and Mayne, 2012; Ziller and Helbling, 2019). Additionally, CCP members typically exhibit greater educational attainment and cognitive abilities compared to the general populace (Ji and Jiang, 2020). Despite these attributes, CCP members are not more likely to support and trust their state institutions (Dickson, 2013). It implies a potential gap in power illusion effect between CCP members and the broader public.

To examine whether certain groups are more reactive to elites' promotion, Table 7 presents the varying effects of elite promotion on political trust among different demographic groups. Individuals work in the public sector or state-owned enterprises, referred to as regime-insiders, and those with affiliation to the CCP demonstrate no response to hometown elites' promotion. This non-reaction may stem from better-informed channels and political knowledge, leading to a more critical assessment that is not merely linked to government performance or a power illusion.

Conversely, our analysis reveals that individuals with children respond more strongly to elite promotions, likely reflecting their vested interest in their children' s prospects. Furthermore, considering the prevalence of internet and TV as mediums for disseminating news on elites' promotions, we initially posited that internet users would be more susceptible to the influence of such promotions. Yet, the result contradicts our expectations, indicating no heightened responsiveness among frequent internet users to elite promotions. Instead, those who do not primarily use the internet as their information source respond more significantly. This suggests they may possess fewer information outlets, potentially exhibiting less open-mindedness, a low level of critical thinking, or a greater propensity to indulge in power illusion.

In summary, our results reveal a markedly stronger influence of elite promotions on political trust among individuals unaffiliated with CCP, those with children, and less frequent users of the internet.

6 Conclusion

Incorporating a psychological lens and employing longitudinal data from China, this study challenges the prevailing institutional performance perspective of political trust,

Table 7. Heterogeneous effect across subgroups

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Regime-insider		CCP member	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
Become leader	0.305**	-0.440	0.316**	0.028
	(0.126)	(0.390)	(0.138)	(0.234)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	11364	868	10034	2198
adj. R2	0.3503	0.4285	0.3456	0.4112
	Have children		Internet is major source	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
Become leader	0.648	0.249**	0.266**	0.288
	(0.495)	(0.123)	(0.125)	(0.390)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	1103	11129	11148	1080
adj. R2	0.3775	0.3531	0.3440	0.4817

*Note: Regime-insiders are those who are employed within the public sector, including state-owned companies, public schools, and government. Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model.*

which predominantly attribute trust levels to government performance evaluations. Instead, we identify a psychological mechanism—the "as if they were me" or "power illusion" effect—triggered by the promotion of local elites to national leadership positions. This effect is particularly pronounced among older males who share demographic traits with these promoted elites. The mechanism is that the promotion of hometown elites cultivates psychological fulfillment and decreases perceived social inequity, thereby enhancing political trust.

Theoretically, we also borrow insights from cultural theory and argue that authoritarian traditions, particularly Confucian and Legalist cultures combined with collectivism, foster an obsession and reverence for power among the populace. This cultivates an admiration for political elites, whose promotion creates the power illusion. Additionally, drawing on theories of political representation, we propose that demographic similarities with political elites, such as shared birthplaces and ages, enhance individuals' perceived representativeness, thus boosting their perception of equality and social status. Our analysis illuminates how psychological mechanisms directly fuel increased political trust following hometown elites' promotions. Specifically, this increase in political trust stems from the psychological fulfillment and perceived fairness, creating an "as if they were me" power illusion. Hence, this study presents an analytical framework that integrates cultural theory and political representativeness theory, positioning psychology as the mediating factor and political trust as the outcome.

Empirically, we show that increased trust is not linked to observable improvements in government performance or economic achievement in the elites' hometowns. Contrary to cross-country evidence suggesting that elites' promotion correlates with improvements in local economic performance, our findings indicate that in Chinese political context, the promotion of elites to national leadership roles fails to catalyze better economic outcomes in their hometown. Instead, we find that the promotion of elites is significantly associated with improvements in subjective well-being, including increased self-satisfaction and perceptions of social status among the local populace. We posit that this increase in subjective well-being underlies the observed rise in political trust, rather than rational assessments of economic or governance performance. This finding underscores the importance of considering non-rational factors in the evaluation of political trust and challenges the conventional wisdom that fluctuations in government performance directly impact trust levels.

Interestingly, we observe that the power illusion effect is notably pronounced

among older males without CCP affiliation and those not employed in the public sector. Despite their advanced age, these "old boys" exhibits politically naivety, and possesses an unrealistic admiration for authority. This power illusion effect is particularly evident in authoritarian regimes where leaders are selected rather than democratically elected. In such contexts, the restricted information flow and propagandistic messaging contribute to reduced political engagement and a lack of political knowledge. We provide valuable insights into the interplay between cultural, psychological, and representational elements in understanding political trust within authoritarian regimes.

Our findings reveal a psychological source for political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes, diverging from Max Weber' s classifications of traditional, charismatic, and rational/performance authority, all of which show signs of weakening in China. The decline of traditional authority ended with the Qing dynasty in 1911, charismatic authority faded post-Mao Zedong, and rational/performance authority is challenged by economic downturns since 2020. We propose a neglected yet consistent psychological source of legitimacy rooted in Confucian philosophy, emphasizing hierarchy and obligations over equality and rights. In authoritarian regimes, power is often equated with freedom, leading to a widespread admiration for it. This belief suggests that without power, freedom is unattainable, prompting ordinary individuals to admire those with extraordinary power and fostering a universal inclination towards authoritarianism. In contrast, democracies flourish in environments that prioritize personal autonomy and identity. Absent these values, efforts towards democratization risk devolving back into authoritarianism. The hierarchical ethos, emphasizing benevolence and loyalty between ruler and subject, advocating for elitist and potentially autocratic governance, which in turn, enhance its political legitimacy.

For the generalizability of our findings, our study suggests the power illusion effect may be particularly pervasive in East Asian societies shaped by Confucian political philosophy that prioritizes hierarchy and obligations. Further study is needed to explore whether the "power illusion" effect occurs in contexts where self autonomy prevails.

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A Appendix Tables

Table A1. Promoted Elites and their hometown

Chinese name	English name	rank	birth city	age
习近平	Xi Jinping	1	Beijing	59
李克强	Li Keqiang	2	Hefei	57
张德江	Zhang Dejiang	3	Anshan	66
俞正声	Yu Zhengsheng	4	Yan'an	67
刘云山	Liu Yunshan	5	Baotou	65
王岐山	Wang Qishan	6	Qingdao	64
张高丽	Zhang Gaoli	7	Quanzhou	66
马凯	Ma Kai	8	Lvliang	66
王沪宁	Wang Huning	9	Shanghai	57
刘延东	Liu Yandong	10	Huaian	67
刘奇葆	Liu Qibao	11	Anqing	59
许其亮	Xu Qiliang	12	Weifang	62
孙春兰	Sun Chunlan	13	Shenyang	62
孙政才	Sun Zhengcai	14	Weihai	49
李建国	Li Jianguo	15	Heze	66
李源潮	Li Yuanchao	16	Huai'an	62
汪洋	Wang Yang	17	Suzhou	57
张春贤	Zhang Chunxian	18	Xuchang	59
范长龙	Fan Changlong	19	Dandong	65
孟建柱	Meng Jianzhu	20	Suzhou	65
赵乐际	Zhao Leji	21	Xining	55
胡春华	Hu Chunhua	22	Yichang	49
栗战书	Li Zhanshu	23	Shijiazhuang	62
郭金龙	Guo Jinlong	24	Nanjing	65
韩正	Han Zheng	25	Shanghai	58

Table A2. Summary Statistics

Variable	Definition (Unit)	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Trust and attitudes:						
Political trust	Levels of trust in local government officials	43580	0.492	0.261	0	1
Parent trust	Levels of trust in respondent's parents	43386	0.85	0.247	0	1
Neighbor trust	Levels of trust in respondent's neighbors	43544	0.591	0.279	0	1
American trust	Levels of trust in Americans	42715	0.202	0.243	0	1
Stranger trust	Levels of trust in strangers	43456	0.191	0.212	0	1
Doctor trust	Levels of trust in doctors	43545	0.593	0.291	0	1
Overall social trust	Overall levels of social trust	43456	0.567	0.495	0	1
Government satisfaction	Satisfaction of local government performance	42472	0.612	0.228	0	1
Awareness of environment problem	Awareness of environment problem in China	43165	0.637	0.273	0	1
Awareness of corruption problem	Awareness of corruption problem in China	42662	0.667	0.285	0	1
Awareness of inequality problem	Awareness of inequality problem in China	43176	0.7	0.246	0	1
Life satisfaction	Satisfaction with respondent's own life	43561	0.637	0.266	0	1
Personal and family characteristics:						
Age	Age of respondent	43580	46.409	16.707	16	95
Urban	rural = 0 urban = 1	43580	0.452	0.498	0	1
Married	Dummy of married or not	43580	0.831	0.375	0	1
Years of Education	Respondent's highest year of education	43580	8.429	4.061	0	22
Working status	Dummy of haing a job or not	43580	0.891	0.312	0	1
income	Household income per capita (CNY)	43580	48378.623	47041.234	150	359800
Child	Dummy of having child	43580	0.24	0.427	0	1
CCP member	Dummy of CCP member or not	43579	0.12	0.326	0	1
Work outdoors	Dummy of working outdoors or not	23209	7.144	3.568	0.504	24
Information is major source	Dummy of Obtain Information via the Internet or not	28566	0.269	0.444	0	1
Surf the Internet	Dummy of surfing the Internet or not	28581	0.369	0.482	0	1
City-level variable:						
Population	City population (million)	43580	5.861	4.466	0.451	33.921
GDP per capita	City GDP per capita (CNY)	43580	45546.39	28753.718	7712	146518

Table A3. Robustness check

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Panel A: change age group					
	full-sample	<30	31-45	46-60	>60
treat_juwei	0.033	-0.278	0.030	-0.056	0.301**
	(0.076)	(0.196)	(0.160)	(0.124)	(0.146)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37683	5690	8637	12033	8485
adj. R2	0.3723	0.3290	0.3739	0.3902	0.3352
Panel B: cluster to household level					
treat_juwei	0.033	-0.214	-0.030	-0.157	0.259**
	(0.076)	(0.259)	(0.164)	(0.133)	(0.120)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37683	3608	7473	11532	12232
adj. R2	0.3723	0.3258	0.3557	0.3825	0.3569
Panel C: province by year fixed effect					
treat_juwei	0.093	-0.349	0.023	0.055	0.311**
	(0.090)	(0.327)	(0.204)	(0.160)	(0.149)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province byYear FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37683	3608	7473	11532	12232
adj. R2	0.3741	0.3277	0.3547	0.3824	0.3592
Panel D: drop Beijing and shanghai respondents					
treat_juwei	0.033	-0.214	-0.030	-0.157	0.259**
	(0.073)	(0.256)	(0.162)	(0.133)	(0.120)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37683	3608	7473	11532	12232
adj. R2	0.3723	0.3258	0.3557	0.3825	0.3569

Standard errors in parentheses

*$p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$*

Table A4. Mechanism analysis 3: increased self-satisfaction

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	mental health	mild depression	moderate depression	Severe depression	happy	self satisfaction
treat_juwei	-0.007	0.004	-0.012	-0.003	0.017	0.029**
	(0.007)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.009)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	12232	12232	12232	12232	12204	12222
adj. R2	0.4475	0.3308	0.2618	0.1959	0.2029	0.3271

Standard errors in parentheses
*p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01*

Table A5. hometown elite promotion and political trust for men older than 55 (The Central Committee promotion)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dependent variable	Political trust (0-10)				
	full-sample	<25	25-40	40-55	>55
Treat_juwei	0.002	-0.019	0.005	-0.003	0.014
	(0.005)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Individual Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	37683	3608	7473	11532	12232
adj. R2	0.3723	0.3259	0.3557	0.3824	0.3568
DV mean	4.92	4.83954	4.460279	4.778635	5.402693

*Note: Individual controls include age, age squared, years of schooling, HUKOU status, marriage status, and family size. City controls include GDP per capita and population. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the individual level. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1, 5 and 10%. Constant is not reported in each model*