

Homeownership, Residential Stability, and Neighbourhood Trust in China

Hongjing Ji

Southwest University

Lizhu Xu

Southwest University

Xiaofu Pan

646276791@qq.com

Southwest University

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Abstract

Housing can connect residents to neighbourhoods through asset ownership and continuity of residence, but these pathways are often treated as interchangeable. This study distinguishes homeownership from residential stability and examines whether local subjective social status forms an indirect pathway to later neighbourhood trust. Data come from 13,290 respondents observed in the 2016, 2018, and 2020 waves of the China Family Panel Studies. Homeownership and prior dwelling stability were measured in 2016, local subjective social status in 2018, and neighbourhood trust in 2020. Linear models adjust for baseline neighbourhood trust, baseline local subjective social status, demographic and household characteristics, employment, province fixed effects, and village or neighbourhood clustered standard errors. Cluster bootstrap estimates are used for indirect associations. In fully adjusted models, homeownership was not associated with subsequent local subjective social status, whereas prior dwelling stability showed a small positive association. Local subjective social status predicted later neighbourhood trust. Neither housing measure had a significant total or direct association with neighbourhood trust. The indirect association between prior dwelling stability and neighbourhood trust through local subjective social status was statistically detectable but substantively small, while the corresponding homeownership pathway was not significant. The findings do not support a general claim that ownership produces neighbourhood trust. They instead identify a limited evaluative pathway associated with prior continuity of residence and show that this conclusion is sensitive to how residential stability is measured.

Introduction

Neighbourhood trust is the expectation that people living nearby will behave in reasonably reliable, cooperative, and considerate ways. It reduces uncertainty in everyday encounters and supports informal assistance, collective problem solving, and participation in local affairs. Neighbourhood trust is therefore commonly treated as a relational component of social capital rather than a purely individual attitude (Coleman, 1988; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Research on neighbourhood effects likewise treats local social processes as consequential while cautioning that residential selection and context are difficult to separate (Sampson, 2012; Sampson et al., 2002; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). Its formation depends partly on opportunities for repeated contact and on how residents understand their place within the local social order.

Housing is one possible link between residents and local social life. Homeownership may bind residents to a neighbourhood through financial investment, control over a dwelling, and expectations of long-term returns. These incentives are central to the proposition that homeowners become more involved in local affairs and accumulate more neighbourhood social capital than renters (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1999; Rohe et al., 2002). Housing tenure, however, is not the same as continuity of residence. Renters may remain in one place for many years, while owners may purchase for investment, move between dwellings, or have weak relationships with neighbours. Residential stability captures a temporal

connection to place that can create opportunities for familiarity even when ownership is absent (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

The distinction is especially important in China. Market reform transformed housing from a welfare allocation into a major household asset, linking housing more closely to wealth accumulation and welfare provision (Aalbers, 2016; Ronald & Doling, 2012). Yet the social meaning of ownership varies across urban commodity housing, former work-unit housing, collectively held rural housing, and other tenure arrangements. High rates of household ownership also reduce the capacity of a simple owner-renter distinction to identify meaningful differences in status or local attachment. Previous studies show that housing wealth, neighbourhood environment, and ownership-residence mismatches may matter more than ownership alone for subjective status or well-being in contemporary China (Chen et al., 2019; Lin, 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2021). The Chinese setting therefore provides a useful case for asking whether the continuity of living in a dwelling carries different social implications from holding property rights.

Existing evidence leaves three gaps. First, studies often use ownership as a proxy for residential stability, although the two concepts describe different resources. Second, many studies use cross-sectional data, making it difficult to separate later neighbourhood trust from pre-existing trust and status differences. Third, the evaluative process connecting housing conditions to neighbourhood trust remains unclear. Residents who perceive that they occupy a more secure or respected position in the local hierarchy may approach neighbours with greater efficacy and lower perceived social threat. Local subjective social status may therefore provide one pathway between housing conditions and later trust, although it is not a direct measure of social networks, belonging, or community acceptance.

This study uses three waves of the China Family Panel Studies to examine these issues. Housing conditions are measured in 2016, local subjective social status in 2018, and neighbourhood trust in 2020. Models control for neighbourhood trust and local subjective social status in 2016, allowing the analysis to estimate whether housing conditions are associated with subsequent differences after baseline levels are held constant. The study asks four questions. Does homeownership predict later local subjective social status? Does prior dwelling stability predict later local subjective social status? Does local subjective social status predict later neighbourhood trust? Do the two housing conditions show indirect associations with later neighbourhood trust through local subjective social status?

The contribution is deliberately bounded. The design strengthens temporal ordering relative to a cross-sectional analysis, but it does not identify causal mediation. The proposed mediator is an evaluation of local social position, not a direct measure of embeddedness. The study consequently uses the language of longitudinal association and indirect association. Its central comparison concerns whether asset ownership and prior continuity of residence convey different information about later local status and neighbourhood trust in a high-ownership society.

Housing and neighbourhood trust

Homeownership as an asset based connection

Homeownership can affect local relationships through material incentives and symbolic status. Owners have a financial stake in property values and neighbourhood quality, which may lengthen planning horizons and encourage participation in collective efforts that protect those interests (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1999). Ownership can also increase control over the dwelling and provide economic security. These features may make it easier to invest time in neighbours and local organisations. Evidence from several countries links ownership to bonding forms of neighbourhood social capital, including trust, exchanges, and belonging, although the relationship with broader civic participation is less consistent (Leviten-Reid & Matthew, 2018).

These arguments do not imply that legal ownership automatically produces local ties. Social capital emerges through relationships, whereas ownership is an institutional claim over an asset (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu, 1986). In Granovetter's (1985) relational formulation, embeddedness concerns how action is situated in ongoing social relations, not the possession of property itself. The consequences of ownership depend on whether the dwelling is occupied, how long the household remains, the quality of the neighbourhood, and the institutional meaning of tenure. In China, ownership is widespread but internally differentiated. Housing value and neighbourhood quality distinguish owners from one another, and these differences contribute to subjective social status (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Fixed-effects evidence also indicates that changes in housing wealth are more strongly related to subjective class identification than ownership itself, particularly where housing prices and inequality are high (Chen et al., 2019). A binary ownership measure may therefore have little independent association once baseline status, income, education, hukou, and other characteristics are considered.

Homeownership may nevertheless affect neighbourhood trust indirectly if residents interpret ownership as evidence of a secure local position. Assets can influence self-evaluation by increasing perceived economic security and by shaping comparisons with locally relevant groups. In this account, ownership is related first to perceived local status and only subsequently to expectations about neighbours. The first hypothesis follows the conventional asset argument while recognising that the association may be weak in a high-ownership context.

Hypothesis 1

Homeownership in 2016 is positively associated with local subjective social status in 2018 after baseline status and covariates are controlled.

Residential stability as temporal continuity

Residential stability concerns continuity in place rather than ownership. Residential biographies often contain moves and stays that cannot be inferred from tenure at a single point in time (Coulter & van Ham, 2013). Remaining in the same dwelling can preserve routines, local knowledge, and opportunities

for repeated encounters. Even limited contact can produce public familiarity, in which residents recognise one another and develop expectations without forming close relationships (Blokland et al., 2023). Time in place can also support attachment and a sense of membership, although the effects of duration depend on neighbourhood conditions and the voluntary or constrained nature of staying (Brown et al., 2003; Hummon, 1992; Lewicka, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Rental housing can likewise become a home, underscoring that attachment and continuity are not exclusive to ownership (Easthope, 2014).

The relationship between stability and trust is not necessarily direct or uniformly positive. Some residents remain because they lack the resources to move, and stable residence in disadvantaged environments may reproduce exclusion. Conversely, moving may improve housing or neighbourhood quality. Residential continuity should therefore be understood as an opportunity condition for familiarity rather than evidence that interaction has occurred. Space conditions opportunities for tie formation, but proximity alone does not create social relationships (Small & Adler, 2019). Chinese studies similarly show that migration, neighbourhood sentiment, and intergroup neighbouring vary across institutional and local contexts (Wang et al., 2016; Wu & Logan, 2016; Zhang et al., 2025), reinforcing the need to distinguish mobility from tenure.

Prior continuity of residence may affect how residents evaluate their position in the local community. Familiarity with local institutions and comparison groups can make one's position more legible. Stable residence may also reduce uncertainty about future housing and preserve recognition accumulated through routine presence. These processes could support a higher evaluation of local standing even when objective socioeconomic resources are controlled. This reasoning leads to the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2

Prior dwelling stability in 2016 is positively associated with local subjective social status in 2018 after baseline status and covariates are controlled.

Local subjective social status as an evaluative pathway

Subjective social status refers to a person's perceived position in a social hierarchy. It differs from income, education, occupation, and wealth because it integrates multiple resources and comparisons into an overall judgement. In China, local subjective social status follows a dynamic trajectory and is shaped by education, income, wealth, employment, and political resources (Zhou, 2021). Housing may enter this judgement because it represents both an asset and a condition of everyday life.

The present study focuses on status in the local area rather than national class identification. A favourable evaluation of one's local position may be associated with confidence in interactions, a greater sense of efficacy, and less anticipation of disrespect or exclusion. These orientations can influence how ambiguous encounters with neighbours are interpreted. Local subjective status may therefore predict neighbourhood trust after objective socioeconomic characteristics and baseline trust are controlled.

This proposed pathway must be distinguished from social embeddedness. The survey item does not measure the number or quality of social ties, participation, local belonging, or acceptance by neighbours. It may also capture general optimism, residential satisfaction, or unobserved neighbourhood advantage. Local subjective social status is consequently treated as an evaluative mediator that is theoretically related to local embeddedness but is not equivalent to it.

Hypothesis 3

Local subjective social status in 2018 is positively associated with neighbourhood trust in 2020 after baseline trust, baseline status, housing conditions, and covariates are controlled.

Hypothesis 4

Homeownership and prior dwelling stability have positive indirect associations with neighbourhood trust through local subjective social status.

Data and methods

Data and analytical sample

The data come from the 2016, 2018, and 2020 waves of the China Family Panel Studies. The CFPS is a biennial longitudinal survey administered by the Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University. Its baseline sample used multistage probability sampling and covered 25 provincial-level units that contained approximately 95 percent of the Chinese population (Xie & Hu, 2014; Xie & Lu, 2015). The survey links individual, household, and community information and is well suited to studying changes in housing and social attitudes.

Respondents were matched across the three waves using the individual identifier. Housing tenure, prior dwelling stability, baseline outcomes, and covariates were drawn from 2016. Local subjective social status was measured in 2018, and neighbourhood trust was measured in 2020. Matching produced 18,948 respondents observed in all three waves. Complete-case requirements removed 5,658 respondents, or 29.9 percent of the matched sample. The analytical sample contained 13,290 respondents nested in 7,628 households and 1,556 baseline villages or neighbourhood communities. Because complete-case selection was substantial and the main models were unweighted, the analytical sample is not presented as a direct national population estimate.

Measures

Neighbourhood trust is the 2020 response to the question asking respondents how much they trusted their neighbours. Responses range from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater trust. The identically worded 2016 item is included as the baseline value. The analysis concerns trust in neighbours and does not generalise the outcome to trust in strangers, institutions, or society as a whole.

Local subjective social status is measured in 2018 by the question asking respondents to rate their social status in the local area on a five-point scale. Higher values indicate a higher perceived local position. The corresponding 2016 measure is controlled in all adjusted models. The main models treat the scale as continuous, an approach also used in prior longitudinal CFPS research on subjective status (Zhou, 2021). This choice facilitates interpretation of the indirect association but does not remove the ordinal nature of the original item.

Homeownership is derived from the 2016 household questionnaire. Households with full or partial property rights in their current dwelling are coded 1; rented, borrowed, or other non-owner arrangements are coded 0. A sensitivity analysis codes only full ownership as ownership.

Prior dwelling stability is based on the 2016 household question asking whether the household still lived in the same dwelling as in the preceding survey wave. Respondents in the same dwelling are coded 1 and those in a different dwelling are coded 0. The measure describes continuity between the preceding wave and 2016. It is not a complete measure of length of residence, the number or reasons for moves, or continued residence after 2016. To examine the dependence of results on this operationalisation, an additional sensitivity analysis uses anonymised community identifiers to indicate whether respondents remained in the same village or neighbourhood community between 2016 and 2018. This alternative captures community continuity rather than the same dwelling and is available for 12,827 respondents.

Covariates are measured in 2016. They include sex, age, age squared, marital status, years of education, employment status, self-rated health, household size, non-agricultural hukou, and household income per person. Income is winsorised at the first and ninety-ninth percentiles and transformed using the inverse hyperbolic sine after division by 10,000 yuan. Province fixed effects account for stable provincial differences in housing markets, economic development, mobility, and institutional context. Standard errors are clustered by the 2016 village or neighbourhood community.

Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations document the sample. Second, local subjective social status in 2018 is regressed on homeownership and prior dwelling stability. The first model contains the two housing variables, the second adds baseline neighbourhood trust and baseline local subjective social status, and the third adds all covariates, employment categories, and province fixed effects.

Third, neighbourhood trust in 2020 is regressed on local subjective social status and the two housing variables using the same sequence of adjustments. A separate model without the 2018 status measure estimates the adjusted total associations of the housing variables. The model containing status estimates their direct associations conditional on the proposed mediator.

Fourth, indirect associations are calculated as the product of the housing-to-status coefficient and the status-to-trust coefficient. Confidence intervals are obtained from 1,000 non-parametric bootstrap

samples drawn with replacement at the baseline village or neighbourhood level. A confidence interval excluding zero is treated as statistical evidence of an indirect association. A significant product does not require a significant total association, but when total and direct coefficients differ in direction from the indirect coefficient, the pattern is interpreted as inconsistent mediation rather than as a general positive effect.

Sensitivity analyses use the 2020 personal panel post-stratification weight, add the 2018 urban-rural classification, restrict ownership to full property rights, and control for neighbourhood trust in 2018. Separate models are also estimated for rural and urban respondents. Finally, community continuity between 2016 and 2018 replaces the retrospective same-dwelling measure. All tests are two-sided. The design establishes temporal ordering and controls baseline outcomes, but it cannot eliminate housing selection, time-varying confounding, measurement error, or reverse relationships operating before baseline.

Results

Sample characteristics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics. Approximately 89.0 percent of respondents lived in a household with full or partial ownership of the current dwelling, and 89.3 percent lived in the same dwelling as in the preceding wave. The high prevalence of both conditions limits variation in the two focal predictors. Mean neighbourhood trust was 6.61 in 2016 and 6.80 in 2020. Mean local subjective social status was 2.84 in 2016 and 3.14 in 2018. These cross-wave mean differences are descriptive and cannot be attributed to housing conditions because period effects and selective retention are not modelled.

Homeownership and prior dwelling stability were moderately correlated with one another at $r = .244$. Their bivariate correlations with 2018 local subjective social status were positive but small at $r = .074$ and $r = .065$, respectively. Local subjective social status in 2018 correlated with neighbourhood trust in 2020 at $r = .165$. Neighbourhood trust showed moderate stability from 2016 to 2020 at $r = .346$, as did local subjective social status between 2016 and 2018 at $r = .346$.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Homeownership	13,290	0.890	0.313	0	1
Prior dwelling stability	13,290	0.893	0.310	0	1
Local subjective social status 2018	13,290	3.141	1.061	1	5
Neighbourhood trust 2020	13,290	6.800	2.069	0	10
Neighbourhood trust 2016	13,290	6.608	2.161	0	10
Local subjective social status 2016	13,290	2.837	1.047	1	5
Male	13,290	0.489	0.500	0	1
Age	13,290	47.185	14.239	16	91
Married	13,290	0.874	0.332	0	1
Years of education	13,290	7.943	4.599	0	22
Self-rated health	13,290	2.953	1.204	1	5
Household size	13,290	4.224	1.972	1	19
Non-agricultural hukou	13,290	0.273	0.446	0	1
Income IHS	13,290	1.182	0.668	0.091	3.285
Note. Means for binary variables are proportions. Statistics are unweighted and refer to the complete-case analytical sample. IHS = inverse hyperbolic sine.					

Housing conditions and local subjective social status

Table 2 reports models predicting local subjective social status in 2018. Without adjustment, both homeownership and prior dwelling stability were positively associated with status. Adding the two baseline outcomes reduced both coefficients. In the fully adjusted model, the homeownership coefficient declined to 0.037 and was not statistically significant. Hypothesis 1 was therefore not supported. The result is consistent with the possibility that simple owner-renter differences in perceived position largely reflect pre-existing status and socioeconomic composition in a sample where ownership is widespread.

Prior dwelling stability remained positively associated with subsequent local subjective social status after full adjustment. Respondents living in the same dwelling as in the preceding wave scored 0.086 points higher on the five-point status scale than respondents who had changed dwellings. The coefficient was statistically significant but small, supporting Hypothesis 2 only in a limited substantive sense. Baseline local subjective social status was the strongest predictor in the model.

Table 2
Housing conditions predicting local subjective social status in 2018

Predictor or model feature	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Homeownership	0.208*** (0.034)	0.121*** (0.031)	0.037 (0.031)
Prior dwelling stability	0.173*** (0.033)	0.148*** (0.029)	0.086** (0.028)
Neighbourhood trust 2016	—	0.036*** (0.005)	0.030*** (0.005)
Local subjective social status 2016	—	0.335*** (0.011)	0.292*** (0.010)
N	13,290	13,290	13,290
R ²	0.008	0.129	0.168
Baseline outcomes	No	Yes	Yes
Full covariates	No	No	Yes
Province fixed effects	No	No	Yes
Note. Unstandardised OLS coefficients are shown with village or neighbourhood community clustered standard errors in parentheses. Full covariates include sex, age, age squared, marital status, education, employment, self-rated health, household size, hukou, and transformed income. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.			

Local subjective social status and neighbourhood trust

Table 3 reports models predicting neighbourhood trust in 2020. Local subjective social status in 2018 was positively associated with later trust in every specification. The coefficient declined from 0.317 in the minimally adjusted model to 0.210 after baseline outcomes were added and to 0.169 in the fully adjusted model. A one-point difference on the five-point local status scale was associated with a 0.169-point difference in neighbourhood trust on the 0-to-10 scale. Hypothesis 3 was supported, although the magnitude was modest.

Baseline neighbourhood trust was a much stronger predictor of trust in 2020, with a fully adjusted coefficient of 0.298. Neither homeownership nor prior dwelling stability had a significant direct association with neighbourhood trust once local subjective status and the full covariate set were included.

Table 3
Local subjective social status predicting neighbourhood trust in 2020

Predictor or model feature	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Homeownership	0.187** (0.063)	0.144* (0.058)	0.086 (0.059)
Prior dwelling stability	-0.009 (0.062)	-0.004 (0.059)	-0.065 (0.059)
Local subjective social status 2018	0.317*** (0.020)	0.210*** (0.021)	0.169*** (0.021)
Neighbourhood trust 2016	—	0.312*** (0.010)	0.298*** (0.009)
Local subjective social status 2016	—	0.084*** (0.020)	0.054** (0.020)
N	13,290	13,290	13,290
R ²	0.028	0.137	0.157
Baseline outcomes	No	Yes	Yes
Full covariates	No	No	Yes
Province fixed effects	No	No	Yes
Note. Unstandardised OLS coefficients are shown with village or neighbourhood community clustered standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.			

Total direct and indirect associations

Table 4 compares the total and direct associations of the housing variables and reports bootstrap indirect associations. In the model excluding 2018 local subjective social status, the adjusted total coefficient was 0.092 for homeownership and - 0.051 for prior dwelling stability. Neither was statistically significant. After local subjective status was added, the corresponding direct coefficients were 0.086 and - 0.065, and neither was statistically significant.

The bootstrap indirect association for homeownership was 0.006, with a 95 percent confidence interval from - 0.004 to 0.017. Hypothesis 4 was not supported for homeownership. The indirect association for prior dwelling stability was 0.015, with a confidence interval from 0.005 to 0.025. This product corresponds to approximately 0.007 standard deviations of neighbourhood trust and is therefore substantively very small. Moreover, its positive direction contrasts with the negative, non-significant total and direct coefficients. The result is best described as a small inconsistent indirect association rather than evidence that residential stability generally increases neighbourhood trust.

Table 4
Total direct and indirect associations with neighbourhood trust in 2020

Estimate	Total association	Direct association	Bootstrap SE	95% bootstrap CI
Panel A Regression coefficients				
Homeownership	0.092 (0.059)	0.086 (0.059)	—	—
Prior dwelling stability	-0.051 (0.059)	-0.065 (0.059)	—	—
Local subjective social status 2018	—	0.169*** (0.021)	—	—
N	13,290	13,290	—	—
R ²	0.151	0.157	—	—
Panel B Product of coefficients				
Homeownership through status	—	0.006	0.005	[-0.004, 0.017]
Prior dwelling stability through status	—	0.015**	0.005	[0.005, 0.025]
Note. Total associations exclude the 2018 status measure; direct associations include it. All models include baseline outcomes, full covariates, and province fixed effects. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. Indirect associations use 1,000 village or neighbourhood community cluster bootstrap replications. CI = confidence interval. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.				

Sensitivity and subgroup analyses

The association between local subjective social status and later neighbourhood trust was stable across the four pre-specified sensitivity models in Table 5. Its coefficient was 0.146 in the weighted analysis, 0.170 after the 2018 urban-rural classification was added, 0.169 when only full property rights defined ownership, and 0.098 when neighbourhood trust in 2018 was controlled. Homeownership and prior dwelling stability retained non-significant direct coefficients in each model.

Separate models for rural and urban respondents produced similar qualitative patterns. Prior dwelling stability predicted subsequent local subjective social status in both the rural sample, $b = 0.130$, $SE = 0.050$, $p = .009$, and the urban sample, $b = 0.069$, $SE = 0.034$, $p = .042$. Local subjective social status predicted later neighbourhood trust in the rural sample, $b = 0.188$, $SE = 0.030$, $p < .001$, and the urban sample, $b = 0.153$, $SE = 0.028$, $p < .001$. The estimated differences between settings are descriptive because a formal interaction test was not specified in advance.

Results were sensitive to the definition of residential continuity. When remaining in the same village or neighbourhood community between 2016 and 2018 replaced the retrospective same-dwelling measure, community continuity did not predict 2018 local subjective social status, $b = 0.010$, $SE = 0.032$, $p = .751$. Its total and direct associations with 2020 neighbourhood trust were also non-significant. This finding prevents a broad interpretation of the main coefficient as evidence that continued exposure to the same neighbourhood raises local status. The observed indirect association applies to the supplied same-dwelling measure and may reflect housing security, mobility selection, or other unmeasured differences rather than accumulated neighbourhood interaction.

Table 5
Sensitivity analyses predicting neighbourhood trust in 2020

Specification	Ownership	Prior dwelling stability	Status 2018	Added covariate	N	R ²
Post-stratification weighted	0.053 (0.090)	-0.060 (0.081)	0.146*** (0.029)	—	10,823	0.174
Add 2018 urban-rural status	0.082 (0.059)	-0.071 (0.059)	0.170*** (0.021)	Urban – 0.108* (0.043)	13,236	0.158
Full ownership only	0.073 (0.053)	-0.062 (0.058)	0.169*** (0.021)	—	13,290	0.157
Add neighbourhood trust 2018	0.099 (0.055)	-0.066 (0.055)	0.098*** (0.020)	Trust 2018 0.294*** (0.011)	13,285	0.227
Note. Unstandardised coefficients are shown with village or neighbourhood community clustered standard errors in parentheses. Every model includes baseline outcomes, full covariates, and province fixed effects. The first model uses the available 2020 personal panel post-stratification weight. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.						

Discussion

This study distinguished homeownership from prior dwelling stability and traced their associations with local subjective social status and neighbourhood trust across three CFPS waves. Three findings are central. Homeownership did not predict subsequent local subjective social status or later neighbourhood trust after baseline outcomes and socioeconomic characteristics were controlled. Prior same-dwelling residence predicted a small difference in subsequent local subjective social status but had no total or direct association with later neighbourhood trust. Local subjective social status predicted later neighbourhood trust and produced a statistically detectable, very small indirect association for prior dwelling stability. The indirect result did not extend to homeownership and did not replicate when stability was defined as remaining in the same community between 2016 and 2018.

The limited information conveyed by ownership

The null homeownership result qualifies the conventional proposition that property rights bind residents to neighbourhood life. Ownership may create incentives to protect housing value, but incentives do not necessarily become relationships. This distinction is particularly relevant in China, where ownership is common and encompasses institutionally diverse housing arrangements. With nearly nine in ten respondents classified as owners, legal tenure provides little differentiation. Housing value, quality, location, mortgage obligations, and whether owners occupy the property may be more consequential than ownership itself.

The result is consistent with Chinese research showing that housing wealth and neighbourhood environment shape subjective status within the large population of owners (Chen et al., 2019; Wang & Zhang, 2021). A binary tenure variable may initially appear to capture status because owners differ from non-owners in age, education, income, hukou, and established residential histories. Once those factors and baseline status are controlled, the residual ownership coefficient can be small. The present analysis therefore does not show that housing assets are socially irrelevant. It shows that property rights in the current dwelling, measured as a binary household characteristic, did not provide independent longitudinal information about the two subjective outcomes.

This finding also cautions against using homeownership as a general proxy for local commitment. Policies intended to strengthen neighbourhood relationships cannot assume that expanding ownership will generate trust. Tenure security, housing quality, opportunities for interaction, and the institutional inclusion of renters require separate attention.

Residential stability and the meaning of staying

The positive coefficient for prior same-dwelling residence is compatible with the idea that continuity reduces uncertainty and preserves locally relevant experience. A stable dwelling may provide a base from which residents evaluate their local position. It may also signal housing security that is not fully represented by ownership. This is one reason renters with stable arrangements should not be treated as socially detached by definition.

The additional analysis, however, changes the strength of this interpretation. Remaining in the same community between 2016 and 2018 was unrelated to subsequent local subjective social status. The main residential-stability variable records whether a household had remained in the same dwelling before the 2016 baseline; it does not establish continued exposure to the same neighbourhood during the full pathway from 2016 to 2020. The coefficient may therefore capture earlier mobility histories, housing security, or selection into moving rather than the accumulation of neighbourly contact.

This distinction also explains why the result should not be translated into a simple policy preference for immobility. Moving can improve housing and access to services, while involuntary immobility can reflect financial constraints. Stability is potentially beneficial only when residents have adequate housing,

reasonable control over whether to stay, and access to local resources. Future studies should measure length of residence, the timing and reasons for moves, tenure security, and post-move neighbourhood conditions.

Local subjective status and neighbourhood trust

Local subjective social status remained positively associated with neighbourhood trust after baseline values were controlled. This association suggests that perceived position in a local hierarchy contains information not captured by income, education, employment, hukou, or previous status alone. Residents who view their local position more favourably may approach interaction with greater efficacy or interpret neighbours' behaviour less defensively. Status may also summarise unmeasured aspects of neighbourhood quality, recognition, and life satisfaction.

The result does not demonstrate that subjective status is a measure of social embeddedness. The item contains no information about contacts, participation, belonging, or reciprocal support. Referring to the coefficient as an embeddedness mechanism would therefore exceed the data. The safer interpretation is that local status is an evaluative pathway that may be related to, but does not measure, social integration.

The size and direction of the indirect estimates reinforce this caution. The indirect association for prior dwelling stability was about 0.015 points on a 0-to-10 trust scale, while the total association was negative and non-significant. Large samples can identify products of small coefficients that have little practical importance. The result is theoretically informative because it separates an evaluative pathway from the overall association, but it provides no basis for claiming that residential stability is a major determinant of neighbourhood trust.

Implications for housing and community policy

The findings support a modest shift in emphasis from ownership promotion to the quality and security of residence. Stable rental arrangements, continuity in access to local services, and protection from involuntary displacement may matter for residents' sense of position even when legal ownership does not. These policies should be justified primarily by housing security and fairness, not by a promise that they will automatically raise neighbourhood trust.

Neighbourhood policy should also create low-cost opportunities for repeated contact across tenure groups. Shared spaces, accessible local services, resident information systems, and inclusive deliberation can provide settings in which familiarity develops. The present study did not evaluate any intervention, so these are policy directions consistent with the theory rather than demonstrated effects.

Finally, evaluations of community programmes should measure relationships directly. Neighbour exchanges, local participation, public familiarity, belonging, and perceived acceptance would allow future research to distinguish whether housing security affects trust through contact, recognition, or general psychological security. A single status item cannot adjudicate among these explanations.

Limitations

Several limitations constrain the conclusions. First, the study is observational. Temporal ordering and baseline adjustment reduce some ambiguity but do not eliminate time-varying confounding, housing selection, or unmeasured personality and neighbourhood characteristics. The estimated indirect associations are statistical decompositions rather than causal mediation effects.

Second, complete-case analysis removed 29.9 percent of respondents matched across the three waves. Attrition and missingness may be related to mobility, housing disadvantage, or trust. Post-stratification weighting did not change the central status coefficient, but weighting cannot fully correct selective item nonresponse. Multiple imputation and inverse-probability weighting should be used when the full pre-selection sample and all predictors of missingness are available.

Third, the focal constructs rely on single items or binary household measures. The neighbourhood-trust item captures one relational domain. Local subjective social status cannot be treated as community acceptance or network position. Homeownership ignores value, debt, housing quality, property-rights type, and ownership-residence mismatch. Measurement error is likely to attenuate some associations and blur theoretical distinctions.

Fourth, the main stability measure is retrospective and limited to whether the household occupied the same dwelling as in the preceding wave. The null result for prospective community continuity shows that conclusions depend on operationalisation. Neither measure captures exact residential duration, multiple moves, reasons for mobility, or whether staying was voluntary.

Fifth, housing is measured at the household level while trust and status are reported by individuals. Multiple respondents within households and communities may share exposures and unobserved conditions. Community-clustered standard errors allow within-community error correlation but do not constitute a multilevel model of household and community processes.

Sixth, the 2020 outcome was measured during the COVID-19 period. Changes in mobility, contact, local governance, and risk perception may have affected neighbourhood trust. The estimates may therefore be period-specific. Later CFPS waves should be used to test whether the pattern persists.

Conclusion

Homeownership and residential continuity represent different connections to housing. In this three-wave analysis, ownership did not predict local subjective social status or neighbourhood trust after baseline differences and socioeconomic characteristics were considered. Prior same-dwelling residence predicted a small increase in later local subjective social status, and local subjective status predicted later neighbourhood trust. Their product formed a statistically detectable but substantively very small indirect association. The total and direct associations of residential stability with trust were not significant, and the first-stage result did not replicate with a prospective same-community measure.

The evidence therefore does not support the claim that either ownership or stability generally produces neighbourhood trust. It instead shows how a narrow measure of previous dwelling continuity may be associated with an evaluative local-status pathway. For housing research, the broader lesson is to separate property rights, residential continuity, perceived position, and actual social ties rather than treating them as interchangeable indicators of community attachment.

Declarations

The China Family Panel Studies data are available to registered users through the Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University at <https://cfpsdata.pku.edu.cn/#/home>, subject to the CFPS data-use agreement. The agreement prohibits redistribution of the original or derived individual-level datasets through journal or third-party platforms. Replication code can be provided to editors and reviewers subject to the same data-use conditions.

Author Contribution

H.J. conceived the study, curated the data, conducted the statistical analyses, and drafted the manuscript. L.X. contributed to the literature review, interpretation of the results, and revision of the manuscript. X.P. supervised the study, contributed to the research design and interpretation of the findings, and critically revised the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The data analysed in this study are from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and are available to registered users through the CFPS Data Centre at <https://cfpsdata.pku.edu.cn/>. Access is subject to registration and the CFPS data-use agreement. In accordance with the CFPS data-sharing policy, the original and derived individual-level datasets may not be redistributed through journal websites or unauthorised third-party repositories.

Ethics statement

This study is a secondary analysis of de-identified CFPS data. The CFPS was approved by the Peking University Biomedical Ethics Review Committee (IRB00001052-14010), and participants provided informed consent. No additional contact with participants was undertaken for this study.

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