Corruption, Anticorruption, and the Transformation of Political Culture in Contemporary China

MACABE KELIHER AND HSINCHAO WU

Since its inception three years ago, Xi Jinping’s anticorruption campaign has targeted some of China’s biggest political and military figures and implicated tens of thousands of cadres. This article argues that the current campaign can be distinguished from the many others over the past thirty years not on account of its extensiveness, but rather in its systematic coupling with two other key moves: administrative reform and disciplinary regulation. Together, these three initiatives aim not only to clean up the malfeasance, graft, and bribery pervasive in Chinese political life today, but also to change the political culture. We demonstrate that the current leadership is forcing a shift in political norms and behaviors, and changing the shared assumptions and practices that inform the political dealings of the society, from the approval of permits to the promotion of judges.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is widely regarded as the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. Upon becoming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012 and President of China in March 2013, Xi has systematically centralized authority and concentrated power into his hands. At the head of the largest bureaucracy in the world today, Xi has assumed leadership of China’s most influential committees that span the Party, the state, the economy, and the military: he chairs the Central National Security Commission to oversee the army, police, and security agencies; he chairs the Central Military Commission and the Commission for Economic Reform, as well as those commissions in charge of policy for foreign affairs, Internet security, and technology—positions usually held by the premier and other high-ranking politicians.

With all this power, Xi has made his greatest task cleaning up government corruption and disciplining the ranks of the Party. In his first speech to the Politburo upon becoming General Secretary, Xi warned, “If corruption becomes increasingly serious, it will inevitably doom the party and the state”; the next year, he went on to articulate an eight-point guide for official conduct. This dire assessment is inherited from former presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who also spoke frequently of the mounting problem. Jiang

Macabe Keliher (macabe@post.harvard.edu) is Jerome Hall Postdoctoral Fellow at Indiana University Maurer School of Law. Hsinchao Wu (hsinchao@gmail.com) is Adjunct Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Indiana University.

that if corruption was not addressed “resolutely” then “the flesh-and-blood ties between
the Party and the people will suffer a lot and the Party will be in danger of losing its ruling
position, or possibly heading for self-destruction.”2 Likewise, upon turning over the
General Secretary position to Xi, Hu Jintao made a point of emphasizing the threat,
saying, “If we fail to handle [corruption], it could prove fatal to the party and even
cause the collapse of the party and the fall of the state.”3 Throughout the reform
period, corruption grew exponentially, largely as a result of the confluence of politics
and economic growth. In order to spur the economy, officials were given greater auton-
omy and capacity to develop and implement regional projects and economic policies,
which nurtured a culture of bribery, graft, misappropriation, and nepotism that now im-
plies every official from the lowest township clerk to the most powerful Politburo
members. Despite repeated anticorruption campaigns, neither Jiang nor Hu were able
to successfully deal with the problem, and left a mounting crisis that Xi has tackled
head on.

Xi is now three years into an expected ten-year rule, and his program in the fight
against corruption can be given a preliminary assessment. Scholars have noted that his
anticorruption campaign is higher profile, less compromising, and more sustained than
those of the past. While all this is true, these aspects seem unlikely to be the formula
for success. More significant, we argue, is that this campaign is coupled with a systematic
effort not only to crackdown on endemic graft and malfeasance, but also to target the
culture that enables it to fester. This is being done on three fronts. In addition to the an-
ticorruption drive that has captured headlines, Xi and his allies are also formalizing anti-
corruption administrative practices and instilling moral discipline into the rank and file.
Although many of Xi’s initiatives were also undertaken by his predecessors, the current
systemization and formalization of measures form a comprehensive program that
creates the possibility not only of stamping out corruption, but also, more importantly,
of transforming the political culture.

Corruption in China

In order to understand the extent of the problem and the foundering of prior efforts,
it is helpful to look at the nature of corruption in China today. Public office has become a
place for profiteering, where political despotism and private greed conspire—it is the
place to obtain wealth, private privilege, and a guarantee of personal stability. Party offici-
als divide themselves into factions and develop networks required for promotion, profit,
and protection. Practices like red-envelope giving make up part of the culture that per-
petuates the networks and corruption. To fail to partake in the gift-giving, banqueting,
and nepotism could mean more than just the end of one’s political career, but also, more importantly,
given that it has become the norm, exclusion and persecution.

2 Jiang Zemin, “Report at the 16th Party Congress,” China Internet Information Center, November
24, 2015).
Corruption is generally defined as the abuse of public office or government position to secure personal gain at the expense of the public interest. In any country, this could include the encouragement and acceptance of money for services (bribery), the granting of privilege to an ascriptive relation (nepotism), or the appropriation of public resources for private use (misappropriation). Beijing effectively expanded this definition in 1997 when it criminalized other aspects of economic corruption like tax evasion, dispersion of state property, and illegal speculation, as well as developed a category of corruption that criminalized noneconomic practices, such as the dereliction of duty, the abuse of power, bigamy, excessive banqueting, and extravagant weddings. These activities are key to understanding the extent of the current anticorruption drive, for it shows the depth of the culture of political norms today. The dominance of the CCP in all government and political affairs, and the economic role of state-owned enterprises, as well as other government organizations, means that the actors involved in corrupt activities can extend beyond public officials and include other public functionaries, such as a company manager or the head of a youth league. To speak of corruption in China today, then, means the abuse of authority by state functionaries for private interest at the expense of the public good. The number of actors partaking in such activities has become so great that it affects the capacity of the government to operate.

The network and dealings of Zhou Yongkang, the former security chief and retired Politburo member just sentenced to life in prison for corruption, gives a sense of how this works. In the 1990s, Zhou was head of China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), which put him in charge of a vast amount of state wealth and energy contracts. Then, from 1999 to 2002, he was the top-ranked official in Sichuan Province. Although no details of any embezzlements or misappropriation of funds were publicized during his trial, it is reported that his family profited handsomely from his position. His son received contracts to sell equipment to state oil fields and filling stations; his son’s mother-in-law held stakes in pipelines and pumps; and his sister-in-law was heavily invested in mines, property, and energy projects. All told, they controlled stakes in at least thirty-seven companies, seventeen of which were in energy investments related to CNPC, and nine were in Sichuan. In many of these instances, no bribe was passed or reward offered; it was enough to be related to a powerful figure and provide access to an expansive network that might pay dividends later. The culture of favor is so pervasive that much of the corruption taking place cannot even be traced, and appears only in the form of the end result. It is for this reason that authorities could only charge Zhou for accepting $118,000 in bribes, a fraction of the estimated $160 million his family is worth.

Such examples illustrate how corruption has become a key aspect of China’s political culture. The paying of bribes, cultivation of networks, and use of political position for private gain are as much a part of being an official as is carrying a Party membership.

---

card. Such activities are the standard means of interaction, where all actors at all levels and in all social and political roles become involved so that not partaking is seen as a transgression of the norm. As Premier Li Keqiang put it in his annual speech to the nation last year, “systemic, institutional, and structural problems” create a “breeding ground of corruption.”

Consider the recent case of six officials from the technology bureau in a Fujian county on a scheduled visit to a local company to check on the use of public research funding. The owner’s son, who was the head government official of a neighboring village, handed each of them a red envelope containing 300 RMB, or the equivalent of about US$50. It was a pittance of an amount considering the millions being flung around China today, but it represents exactly the kind of culture these actors find themselves operating within. The company owner felt he had to give something lest he infringe upon the political norms, even though the visit was inconsequential. Likewise, the officials accepted the meager amount knowing it would make little difference to their finances but recognized it as part of the process of their jobs. As this example shows, the shared understanding of the ubiquitous practice of bribes and favors is now so integrated into the daily operations of government that it is impossible to weed out corrupt officials because everyone is corrupt.

**Anticorruption**

Ever cognizant of the problem, Chinese leaders have attempted to keep corruption in check. Throughout the reform period, the Party launched one anticorruption drive after another—on average, one every two years since 1982—each time coming down hard on a number of egregious cases, but never making a significant impact on the problem. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, senior and junior officials were investigated, prosecuted, and even executed. Although these campaigns produced results—between 1992 and 1997, seventy-eight provincial- and ministerial-level officials were prosecuted, including a member of the Politburo, and from 2002 to 2007, 677,924 cases were brought against corrupt cadres—they led to a routinization of anticorruption efforts, which appear sporadically, sweep up just over 100,000 officials annually, but allows business to continue as usual.

The current leaders appear intent on changing this. Under the direction of Xi Jinping and anticorruption czar Wang Qishan, the Party has engaged in an extensive and uncompromising anticorruption campaign. Some of the most powerful civil and military officials in China are being investigated and have begun to fall. Former security chief and retired

---


Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang was sentenced to life in prison in June 2015 for abuse of power and accepting bribes, and his associates are being convicted one by one. The top aide to former president Hu Jintao, Ling Jihua, who was once tapped to move into a Politburo position, was expelled from the party in July and will face charges of graft. Rumors circulate that former vice president Zeng Qinghong could be the next big target. Generals and senior military officials are also being taken down: retired general and former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission Guo Boxiong was expelled from the Party and is expected to be convicted of accepting bribes. His expulsion follows on the heels of the similar fate of another retired general, Xu Caihou (who would have faced trial had he not died of bladder cancer in March), and the opening of investigations of another sixteen major generals.

Mid- and lower-level officials are just as prone to investigation and persecution, if not more so. Hundreds of thousands of petty officials are under censor for graft, bribes, illegal expenditures, and political and economic favors. According to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the government body spearheading the campaign, 414,000 officials have been disciplined by the Party for corruption since Xi took over, and 201,600 prosecuted in court for the infraction. In Shanxi alone, one of the most corrupt provinces in China, some 15,450 officials were convicted of corruption in 2014, an increase of 30 percent over 2013. Within these ranks, it is estimated that over fifty officials at the ministerial level or above have been apprehended, and state media reports that in the first six months of 2015 alone, fifteen high-level officials were investigated. State propaganda refers to it as “killing tigers and swatting flies,” where the tigers are the powerful and the flies the petty officials.

As the campaign intensifies, reports from all over China detail a growing paranoia of prosecution among officials and cutbacks in department spending. Where lavish banquets, junkets, and gift-giving were once standard practice, today they are taboo. Not only have Party orders been issued prohibiting wasteful and unnecessary spending at all levels of government, but officials also take it upon themselves to forgo many other privileges they once indulged in out of fear it might draw attention. Even the once ubiquitous red envelopes are shunned and avoided. As a section chief in the Shanxi provincial education bureau put it in reference to Chinese New Year in 2015, “No one dares to visit a superior’s home to celebrate. Doing so will give trouble, not luck!” Similarly, a local police station in Shanxi reported that prior to the Chinese New Year, department heads and cadres called and sent text messages informing personnel not to make house visits to celebrate the New Year, for fear that they were being watched and would be investigated.

Compared to prior campaigns, there is a slight uptick in the number of cases, and no one seems to be exempt, not even retired Politburo members. Furthermore, three years

12Ibid.
into it, this campaign is still going strong. Despite an apparent slowdown last summer, as
the bottom fell out of the Shanghai stock market and the government’s attention was
turned to pumping in money to avoid a complete collapse, anticorruption authorities
were still at work. As the head of the CCDI, and with Xi’s full support, Wang Qishan
has a mandate to investigate, prosecute, and seek convictions for those who indulge in
corruption at all levels of government. The recent death sentence for the former
deputy logistics chief of the army for graft is a clear expression of this, and arrests and
convictions show no sign of abating, as Xi’s remarks in Seattle in September 2015
made clear. In fact, anticorruption efforts are expanding with the assistance of citizens
through online reporting. Despite the crackdown on civic groups and Internet discussion
of corruption, Beijing has acted on online whistleblowing reports and encouraged citizens
to report on official wrongdoing through the CCDI website. From 2008 to 2012, for
example, investigating agencies received over 300,000 online public tip-offs.13 As the
CCDI continues to act on these tips, and the public recognizes the utility of this
service, it could become an important front in the anticorruption campaign.

In addition to these arrests, there are also two key system-wide experimental anticor-
ruption practices being discussed: anticorruption zones and amnesty. The first of these is
the creation of special anticorruption zones. The idea is to replicate the practice of special
economic zones in certain parts of the country, where a different system applies in order
to allow for experimentation and the development of new ideas and practices. Rather
than marketization, the anticorruption zones would pilot political reform and be run
by new officials who would have their household assets made transparent. These zones
would be authorized by Beijing, and an independent anticorruption agency would be as-
signed to monitor and investigate. Similarly, an amnesty might be forthcoming. Rather
than attempt the impossible of investigating and arresting all corrupt officials, a condi-
tional amnesty may be granted, whereby all offenders would be forgiven of past
crimes on the condition they return their ill-gotten gains. This would also help prevent
the practice of officials transferring wealth abroad and fleeing the country.14

ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS AND REFORMS

Despite these anticorruption initiatives, the capacity of the state to do anything is
limited by the institutions at its disposal. At every stage, officials are prone to protect
those in their networks and cover up for each other. The anticorruption agencies
either have their hands tied by Party higher ups and patrons, or their officials become
embedded in the departments they are supposed to investigate and subsumed by the
culture of corruption. The vertical and horizontal networks enable officials to alert
each other of investigations and suppress any exposure. Reports detail how organized

13“Wangluo fanfu haixugaodu zhongshi” [Continued need to emphasize anticorruption through the
Internet], Xi’an ribao, May 9, 2013, http://www.71.cn/2013/0513/712915.shtml (accessed November
28, 2015).
14See Wang Lei and Wang Can, “Zhongjiwei fanfu zhuanxing wei teshe yumai fuli?” [Is the CCDI
shifting the anticorruption movement to offer amnesty?], Duowei xinwen, July 17, 2015, http://
corruption rings not only draw in all levels of government officials, but also coach each other to thwart and confront investigations. At the root of it, there are two key institutional problems: the lack of autonomy of anticorruption agencies, and the lack of clear anticorruption organizational procedures and regulations. Both of these issues are being addressed by the Xi leadership in tandem with the anticorruption drive.

The institutional design of the PRC government gives primacy to the Party. All agencies, including the CCDI, are responsible to the Party and designed foremost to protect and maintain the Party’s authority. As the main anticorruption agency, the CCDI was formed in 1949, but rather than being given autonomy to investigate and pursue corruption in the interest of the state and society, it was subordinated to the Politburo and the local Party Committees. In the center, the CCDI had to report to the Politburo standing committee for approval to investigate high-level cases, and if the case involved a member of the Politburo then the decision had to come from a consensus of incumbent and retired leaders. This arrangement effectively blocked CCDI operations as an anticorruption agency, especially in the early 2000s, when collective corruption involved extensive networks that reached up to Politburo members. The local arm of the CCDI, the provincial-level Committees for Disciplinary Inspection (CDI), were put in a similar dilemma. The head of the local CDI was also part of the provincial Party Committee and responsible to the Committee. This gave the Party control and decision-making power over anticorruption activities. Furthermore, the local Party would always have greater influence because it controlled appointments of anticorruption officers and their resources, including salary, housing, and benefits. Studies have found that CDI units reporting to the Party Committee on internal corruption were deterred from opening cases and encouraged to protect cadres. Empirically, it has been shown that it was rare for the CDI to investigate the local Party Committee unless directed by higher ups.

This lack of institutional autonomy is coupled with an absence of rules for anticorruption procedures and operations, alongside an ambiguous chain of command. The nature and practice of anticorruption inspection has been undefined and unregulated, leaving inspectors to proceed by custom. For example, inspectors do not know if they must notify a department before inspection or not, or how much time and funding they have at their disposal. But even if such rules were in place, the ambiguity of the relationship between the Party and the inspection commission would remain a hindrance. How much control the CCDI has over the CDIs remains unclear. Although a CDI is supposed to be a local arm of the CCDI, a CDI is also jurisdictionally accountable to the local Party Committee and required to report to the Committee. Furthermore, a CDI has a functional role of supervising the local Party Committee and has a mandate to act as a separate supervising body, but at the same time it is part of the Committee, as the CDI head is an active Committee member. Reforms in 2004 were supposed to clarify these relationships and end the dual role of CDIs by putting inspection officials under the direct control of the CCDI. This was meant to remove all influence of the local Party Committees, but

appointments have ended up getting co-opted by the local Party anyway, and investigations and crackdowns thwarted.\textsuperscript{17}

The Xi government has moved to address these issues in a manner consistent with reforms under Jiang and Hu, but is doing so in a way that attempts to further centralize control and rationalize procedure. Three key reforms have been instituted with the purported aim to give the CCDI greater autonomy. The first reform is an increase in the number of inspection offices so that an entire team can monitor provincial-level officials rather than a single individual, who often becomes coopted by the Party Committee. Furthermore, these teams of investigators have been given the power to not only monitor but also exercise legal powers, such as interrogation and intercepting communications. Although this first reform is effectively increasing the size of the CCDI and giving investigators greater scope, the government claims that it will enable greater investigative autonomy.\textsuperscript{18} Second, the CCDI has taken control over the appointment of CDI heads, thereby detaching the position from the Party Committee. Now, the CDI head is parachuted in and reports back to the center, which is a concerted attempt to assert central control over the localities.\textsuperscript{19} Third, Central Inspection Groups have been revived, whereby irregular and unannounced inspections are sent out to the provinces and ministries. These groups do not have legal powers, but can investigate randomly and report their findings back to the CCDI.\textsuperscript{20}

These measures were followed up in June 2015 with a series of regulations for inspection procedures and triggers for disciplinary action. New laws enable the irregular inspection of local governments by the CCDI and CDIs, stipulating their capacity to go in unannounced with powers to search, seize, and detain. The laws spell out agency funding and the amount of time to be spent.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, investigators have been given a set of administrative regulations they can use to hold officials accountable, especially those officials in leadership positions. Stipulations detail six conditions for which a leader can be removed, including disrespecting and exploiting subordinates and violating Party regulations, and five conditions of shirking responsibility that will lead to removal, including nepotism, engaging in factionalism, and violating moral codes.\textsuperscript{22} Although many of these measures were initiated under Jiang and Hu, and have been in practice for a number of years, the recent formalization provides a measure of legality and clarifies

\textsuperscript{19}It should be noted that retracting local control has been attempted in other areas, such as financial reform, and has only met with modest success. It remains to be seen if this initiative will give investigators greater agency in practice, as the government hopes.
\textsuperscript{20}For more on these reforms, see Fu Hualing, “Wielding the Sword,” op. cit. note 17.
the jurisdictional and operational procedures, which often led to ambiguity and thus avoidance. The government claims that these reforms and their formalization will help address the problems of autonomy and ambiguity, the realization of which we must still await.

In addition, Beijing is also moving to codify certain administrative adjustments. Rules and regulations are being articulated for many practices, some of which have been in effect since Hu Jintao’s term in office. A formalization will almost certainly be seen in appointments and promotions, most likely beginning at the provincial level. From the data at hand, all provincial- and ministerial-level appointments in 2013 and 2014 were done systematically and in accordance with an official’s bureaucratic rank and position—that is, none of the appointments indicate patronage or special favor. It will not be surprising if this kind of informal practice is formalized in regulations.

Standardizing and restructuring salaries are also major initiatives. Although a law was passed in January 2015 to increase salaries by half to double, depending on the position, some posts are still far below a living wage, making graft a necessity for livelihood, not just a means to personal riches. Newly stipulated salary increases every two years and pilot programs for performance-based rewards aim to continue to address this problem in order to make government service financially rewarding for the work done rather than the relationships cultivated. But perhaps more important than pay raises is the need to standardize salaries across provinces and to make transparent the administrative pay scale. Currently, official salaries are not made known, even internally, and to the extent that they are known, salaries for a similar-level post can vary widely. Transparency will help clarify how much officials make legally and should be making. Such a measure is also discussed in concert with the complete elimination of perks, such as housing and transportation, as well as an increase in health benefits and pensions.

**Moral Guidelines and Disciplinary Regulations**

Even if these institutional measures are successful, the pervasiveness of malfeasance would still make it impossible to investigate and prosecute all corrupt officials; and even if it were possible, doing so would leave the country without much of an administrative apparatus. How to run a country if the entire bureaucracy is locked up for venality and the prosecutors must prosecute themselves? One cannot rule without the administrative

---


support of others, which helps explain why successful anticorruption efforts throughout
history, both in China and elsewhere, have included a moral dimension, whereby political
norms and practices are reshaped to correspond to an operative ideal, and officials’
behavior is crafted through moral indoctrination and ritual adherence. The challenge
for Xi and his allies is to restructure what is considered legitimate in the political order
and to enable nondeviant assumptions and behaviors to be rewarded, while at the
same time turning the current widespread acceptance of corruption, bribery, and patron-
age into deviant practices that would make the culprit an outsider.

Xi has said as much in so many words. He speaks frequently of the need to combat
excessive bureaucratization, hedonism, and use of public funds and position for personal
advancement and pleasure. When he first took over as General Secretary of the Party in
late 2012, he talked of changing the culture of the government offices and laid out eight
points for official behavior. These points included actions like restricting the level of
pomp for officials on tour—organizing people to stand around and applaud, laying out
red carpets, and holding large banquets. Other points included requiring official speech-
es and meetings to be brief and to the point, not closing roads or manipulating traffic
signals when going out, and being frugal in expenditures. More recently, on January
13, 2015, he gave a talk to the CCDI that rearticulated these goals. He spoke of chang-
ing the political culture of the CCP by promoting political discipline and norms. “In gov-
erning the state and society,” he said, “the key is to establish norms, think norms, and
follow norms.” These norms, Xi went onto explain, include four core areas: adhering
to the Party constitution, obeying Party orders, following state laws, and having good
customs.

The essence of these admonitions is that individual Party members exhibit loyalty
and obedience to the Party; how this should be translated into practice can be pieced to-
gether from speeches, Party documents, and recent prosecutions. In our analysis, two
general categories of prescribed activity emerge, that of correct moral action and that
of proper livelihood.

On correct moral action, officials are instructed to be honest and upright in their off-
cial dealings. Rather than laying out clear guidelines and rules, however, officials are told
to examine themselves and pursue righteousness, as any good Confucian ought. In an in-
structional meeting with members of the Party Political Bureau, Xi quoted Confucius,
saying, “Govern with virtue and keep order through punishments.” He implored offici-
25
26
27
28
cials to be virtuous and honest, and to only use force to maintain stability, telling them

25 “Zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhiju zhaokai huiyi guanyu gaijin gongzuo zuofeng” [Politburo
meets to investigate a regulation about work practices], Renmin wang, December 5, 2012, http://cpc.
26 “Xi Jinping zai shibajie zhongyang jiwei wu ci quanhui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [The im-
portant speech by Xi Jinping at the 5th plenum of the 18th party congress], Renmin ribao, January
2015).
27 Sheng Mengzhe, Chen Zhenkai, and Liu Shaohua, “Zhonggong de zhengzhi guiju shi shenme”
28 “Xi Jinping: Jiejue Zhongguo de wenti zhi neng zai Zhongguo dadishang tanxun shihe ziji de daolu
he banfa” [Xi Jinping: The solution to China’s problems are only found in China’s own land],
to first develop their own moral character so as to become effective and upright. A talk at a meeting in June 2014 gives an indication of what Xi has in mind. Speaking to Party leaders on how to design training workshops, he laid out four points on what such moral behavior consists of: to use the Party constitution as a guide for one’s activities; to be honest and upright in one’s dealings, especially not giving or accepting bribes and red envelopes; to examine one’s actions against the spirit of the Party; and to change in the face of a problem.

Less amorphous are the guidelines set forth for the proper livelihood of officials. An internal Party regulation recently circulated standardizing the number of cars for officials of various ranks and position, whether certain officials can have secretaries, the size and value of their residences, and which officials can have a security detail. More immediate have been the rebukes. In Hunan last year, for example, 156 officials were punished or fired for infractions, such as drinking or banqueting at work, gambling, lying, absenteeism, allowing factions to form among subordinates, using one’s office for financial gain, and, equally nefarious, not responding to letters from the people. Officials’ personal lives have also fallen under Party scrutiny. Xi has repeatedly emphasized internal Party regulations that require members to report any major life changes by the official or his or her relatives, including travel abroad, investments or major purchases, relatives in business, “or anything else deemed important that the Party needs to know.” Furthermore, regulations require officials to report if they remarry or divorce, and to give reasons and justifications for the decision. A formal report on these matters by each Party member is due March 1 every year, and regular reports need to be filed by members as major events arise. Although this regulation has been on the books for some time, only recently has the CCDI issued an order to begin checking whether officials file their reports or not.

33CCDI, “Bufen ganbu bu zhixing qingshi baogao zhidu xianxiang toushi” [An examination of the phenomenon that some officials do not make reports as required], October 30, 2014, http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/gzdt/dfl/201410/t20141030_41481.html (accessed December 7, 2015). For the regulation, see “Zhonggong zhongyang bangongting yinfa ‘guanyu dangyuan lingdao ganbu baogao gen ren you guan shixian de guiding’ de tongzhi” [Notice printed by the CCP central offices about the regulation for officials to report on personal affairs], Zhongguo gongchandang xinwen,
Much of Xi’s action on moral discipline so far amounts to exhortations and further internal regulations, to be sure. Nor are all of these developments new, and previous corruption campaigns have at least paid lip service to morality. But rarely have such initiatives been pursued with this amount of vigor, and the last time similar actions were part of a larger strategy to overhaul the political culture was in the Maoist period. A 1940s rule against graft, for example, helped garner popular support for the CCP to win the civil war against the perceived decrepit and corrupt Nationalist government. It says something about Xi that this rule has been revived and employed today to help clean up official corruption: namely, that he is the first Chinese leader in the reform period to give primacy to moral bearing and proper practice in the fight against corruption.

Furthermore, the moral proclamations and regulations are being translated into concrete measures of enforcement and training. Three years ago, the CCDI announced that in addition to corruption, it would now focus investigative resources on the transgressions of moral discipline as laid out by Xi. At the time, Wang Qishan emphasized the importance of this transition, saying, “Currently we are focusing on punishing corruption, but this is in order to gain time to deal with the root problem.” That root problem, Wang said, is the lack of proper practice and moral discipline, which he announced would be the main focus of CCDI efforts to shift the political culture. At the annual CCDI conference in January 2015, Wang announced that in 2014, 71,000 cadres had been investigated for disciplinary violations apart from corruption, out of which 23,000 had been punished. An internal evaluation in August 2015 showed that the local CDI units have taken on more cases of violations of internal discipline and moral infraction.

Beijing also has begun internal department anticorruption educational training. Similar to Hong Kong’s successful initiatives in the 1970s, which entailed sending teams of anticorruption educators into government departments to instruct all levels of officials on how to deal with corruption, Beijing has opened courses to teach officials what is acceptable and legal, and what is not. Training includes how to say no to a supervisor demanding corrupt behavior, as well as avoidance maneuvers. In addition, officials are regularly taken to visit jails housing former officials sentenced for corruption, or to interview convicts who speak remorsefully about their corrupt practices. If Hong
Kong’s success with anticorruption instruction serves as any indication, this initiative may not only begin to instill officials with an understanding of the venality of certain acts, but also impart methods for confronting and minimizing corrupt activity.

**Transforming China’s Political Culture**

Together, these three initiatives—anticorruption, administrative formalization, and moral discipline—aim to instill discipline in an increasingly deviant bureaucracy. The targeted anticorruption crackdown punishes the worst offenses and has sent a shudder throughout the bureaucracy; administrative reforms aim to give greater autonomy to investigative agencies, making it easier for them fulfill their mission; while moral guidelines and disciplinary regulations attempt to reorient official practice. More than just centralizing power, the overarching trend of this program aims to force a shift in norms and behaviors, thereby changing the shared assumptions and practices that inform the political dealings of the society—from the approval of permits to the promotion of judges. The leadership appears to be attempting to remake both the political ideals of officials and the common modes of political operations and practices. Seen in this way, the Party leadership is trying to do nothing less than transform China’s political culture.

What is political culture and how can it be changed? Political culture has long been recognized as essential in understanding state governance. It is well known that it takes more than just leaders and political institutions to run a state—it also requires a cohesive group of political and administrative officials who subscribe to assigned duties and mutually partake in the act of governing, as well as a population that identifies with the organization and methods of the governors. As contemporary state-builders have discovered in places like the Middle East and Africa, it is not enough to set up independent courts or to hold elections. For political institutions like democracy to flourish or for authoritarianism to reign, norms and practices must develop to inform behavior, and a shared set of values must exist to promote common goals. In the smooth functioning of any political system, people must be invested with a sense of common purpose, whether it be in the act of electing their president or in the administration of a locality, while shared assumptions and norms inform political dealings, from voting patterns to paying bribes for building permits. An actor operating on these assumptions will be viewed as legitimate in the political order and rewarded accordingly. Conversely, an outsider with different views on the nature of political relationships and behaviors, and who privileges different activities in pursuit of different goals, will be seen as deviant and in violation of the culture—not giving a red envelope, for example, or giving the wrong amount to the wrong person.

Political culture is also intimately intertwined with ideology. American political culture, for example, is often spoken of in terms of individual liberty and civic

---


organization. From Xi’s speeches and writings over the past three years, it appears that he is trying to establish a new basis from a particular understanding of Chinese tradition. Although this understanding has not been fully articulated, Xi has consistently drawn on Confucius and certain aspects of Confucianism that emphasize self-cultivation for public service and the adherence to proper conduct and moral norms that give primacy to established social order and cohesion. This is manifest in the practices outlined above, as well as through the concentration of power and the crackdown on civil society. In short, it is an ideology that supports a rising authoritarianism that can be put to use to attack corruption, but also to silence dissent.

The making of a new political culture in contemporary China involves the orchestration of a number of measures, including institutional incentive, administrative practices, and a convincing ideology. Previous leaders made attempts in each of these areas, but they did not initiate a comprehensive program to deal with the overriding problem of the culture of corruption in conjunction with bureaucratic discipline. Both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao undertook focused efforts in various areas: they both initiated countless anticorruption drives, tinkered with the administrative structure and practices, and extolled officials to be more upright in their dealings. Yet not only did the problem persist, it was also compounded because individual or isolated initiatives could not change established norms and practices. The efforts now underway by Xi Jinping, as outlined above, do seem to fit together as a single program to bring together an anticorruption drive, administrative reforms, moral guidelines, and ideological refashioning to do more than just address an immediate problem, but, as Wang Qishan said, get at the root and to transform the political culture. Success may depend on how well these various elements and initiatives remain focused in a cohesive program.

Authors’ Note

Some of the ideas in this article were first developed by the authors in “How to Discipline 90 Million People: Can China’s President Reform the World’s Largest One-Party State by Reforming Its Officials?” Atlantic, April 7, 2015.