

Reflections on Research on Accountability and Anticorruption in Chinese Politics

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To address questions posed by conference organizers, I skimmed and read anew from a large relevant literature, some cited here, in which I remain intellectually engaged. Brevity imposes choices and focus. Two reflections, maybe obvious, by way of introduction.

1. Anticorruption, not corruption. Work on Chinese politics, especially work after 1978, pays more attention to corruption than to anticorruption. Yet, corruption seems less interesting a puzzle (and less puzzling) than is clean governance, in any context. Anticorruption is perhaps even more interesting, especially in contexts where corruption is quite prevalent.

2. Accountability is within the party. The “assigned topic” pairs anticorruption with accountability. My memo focuses on anticorruption, reflecting on accountability (to the extent that I do) in its relationship to research on anticorruption. Accountability is a principal-agent problem. Most research on anticorruption in Chinese politics acknowledges this, at least implicitly: the main action happens within the hierarchically designed communist party, principals are at the top of the hierarchy in Beijing, anticorruption is about asserting organizational discipline on agents. Anticorruption choices can be choices to be responsive to mass public preferences—but responsiveness is not the same as accountability. The accountability design is within the communist party.

Cumulativeness in New Research

As a general matter, knowledge aggregation (i.e., cumulativeness) on questions of interest to political scientists is difficult.¹ In quantitative empirical work, small differences in data, measures, models, or even software normally yield different empirical findings. Qualitative descriptive work also faces obstacles (e.g., different sources or cases) to cumulativeness. Most new (and less new) research on anticorruption in Chinese politics does not have cumulativeness as an explicit aim; nor does the discipline or subfield reward it much. Not all new research on the topic *engages other relevant work*, although most at least acknowledges such work.² I elaborate in point 4 below, but engagement seems a preliminary step for cumulativeness.

3. Lack of longitudinal engagement. New research on anticorruption in Chinese politics mostly pays little or no attention to (much less builds on) scholarship from decades ago, often from even one decade ago. Absence of linkages to Maoist-era anticorruption in new research is not surprising, nor are reasons unique to the topic of anticorruption. The reasons have something to do with new sources, methods, and journal publication pressures, but there are also substantive issues: new features of anticorruption and the political-economic context in

¹ In comparative politics, the Evidence in Government and Policy (EGAP) project is my favorite example of how difficult.

² I (quite arbitrarily) define new research as work produced since about 2010.

which it occurs. Acknowledging such new features is *not* the same as cumulateness. I suggest in point 5 below some foundations in older work with which new research could in fact engage to advantage.

4. Some horizontal cumulateness. Most new research on anticorruption in Chinese politics is at least narrowly self-referential, in the sense that it cites other new research that addresses the same or similar questions, but this is simply a publication norm, not cumulateness. As I illustrate below with reference to a few works, there is also some engagement and some progress toward cumulateness. I focus on two substantively different research agendas: anticorruption campaigns and anticorruption agency design. A third agenda, public opinion about anticorruption (see e.g., Sun and Yuan 2017; Wang and Dickson August 11, 2016), is less well-developed.

a. Anticorruption campaigns. Anticorruption campaigns have been a focus of research on anticorruption in Chinese politics for the past two decades and are a major focus of new research. The ongoing campaign, launched in late 2012, has lasted longer and netted more officials and more senior officials than any in the party's history. Scholars differ on whether to take the half-dozen or so campaigns launched since 1982 seriously as anticorruption campaigns, and not (or not only) regime legitimation efforts or elite power struggles. The key debate in the new research is whether the ongoing campaign is a sincere anticorruption effort or essentially a disguised elite struggle. On different sides of it, essays draw inferences by highlighting relevant structural features of the regime (e.g., Fu 2014) or the campaign itself (e.g., Manion 2016), for example. This strategy of deductive reasoning engages, but its terms of argument are too controversial to be a basis for cumulateness. Ultimately, I think the way forward on this question is to test empirically its implications by mapping connections between leaders calling the shots and officials the campaign has felled. Methodologically, this is far from simple or straightforward. The most thoroughgoing work of this sort is Lu and Lorentzen (November 6, 2016).³ It concludes the campaign is primarily sincere as an anticorruption effort, but this is certainly not the last word, for all the same reasons that we have not (yet!) reached consensus on political selection, although everyone is using basically the same biodata. The paper is a point of departure for real knowledge aggregation on this question, setting the terms in a way that invites (competent) others to engage. The now vast (and, I think, very important) political selection literature offers a cautionary note: this line of inquiry could become simply a playground, with lots of cross-referencing but not cumulateness.

There is also a growing new empirical literature (e.g., Qian and Wen April 20, 2015; Dang and Yang 2016; Wang 2016; Ding, Fang, Lin, and Shi 2017; Kong, Wang, and Wang 2017; Lin, Morck, Yeung, and Zhao 2017; Xu and Go 2017), mostly in economics and business journals, that investigates the economic effects of the campaign and mostly concludes these are negative (e.g., for growth and innovation). In principle, opportunities for cumulateness here are significant; in practice, lots of different dependent variables. It does suggest something worth considering, a caveat to the caution above: different variables reflecting

³ Wedeman (2017) is a less sophisticated attempt, yielding the same substantive conclusion.

some broadly construed construct (here, economic performance) can generate cumulateness, even if the work of “adding up” is left to the consumer and not the producer of research herself.

b. Anticorruption agency design. Anticorruption agencies are another major focus of new research on anticorruption in Chinese politics since the revival of the party’s discipline inspection committees, government supervisory departments, and anticorruption departments in the procuracy after 1978. The key debate in the new research is the extent to which fundamentals of Chinese anticorruption agency design can facilitate corruption control and at what cost (e.g., to the party, local governance). Mostly, the focus is on the party’s own anticorruption agency, but its relationship with other agencies is also a focus. The new research tends to be descriptive and detailed, but often supplements archival research with fieldwork and interviews. Underlying this research is the notion that structural details matter (maybe greatly), itself an interesting and not uncontroversial assumption in China’s authoritarian context. The new powers and operation of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission under Wang Qishan in the ongoing anticorruption campaign have drawn even greater attention to anticorruption agency design; the new anticorruption super-agency will generate more dissection of structural detail and fuel more debate. The research on agency design in China’s anticorruption is cumulative in the most uncomplicated way: researchers collect and share details about structures and processes (e.g., Guo 2014; Gong 2015; Li and Deng 2016; Yeo 2016), to build up a description of how anticorruption operates. The debate is less about the structural facts, more their fit into broad long-term anticorruption and governance goals and short-term political goals of top leaders. It has gone (way) beyond unsubtle discussions of the Leninist-type party or problematic relationships between discipline inspection committees and the generalist party committees, for example. There is a rough consensus that agency design is seriously problematic for corruption control, but disagreement about which features pose the biggest obstacle.

Opportunities

The key debates in the two areas above establish foundations and make some progress toward knowledge aggregation on some major issues in Chinese anticorruption. There is scope for integrating insights from decades ago, however, as well as additional questions to pursue.

5. Relevant earlier foundations. Are there in fact relevant foundations in work from decades ago on which new research can usefully build? Keeping the focus specific, work on party rectification and inner-party norms seems still useful, indeed, some of it seems newly timely, despite a very different context. Work by Teiwes (1978, 1979, 1990) is a good example. Methodologically, this is old-school stuff: it meticulously pieces together historical details through archival sources to describe specific events, then (but not always) steps back to make an argument, sometimes also a conceptual argument. The dissection of the Gao Gang affair (Teiwes 1990), the first big purge in the ruling party’s history, is about a regional leader engaging in “illegitimate factional activities,” seeking support from among other political elites and upsetting arrangements for future leadership transition. The broader framework in Teiwes (1978, 1979) is an argument about elite consensus on a norm of party rectification,

and elite complicity when a powerful leader (Mao) violates the norm because it no longer suits him. This is a never just a blow-by-blow discussion of elite *kto-kovo* politics; it is about institutionalization of elite politics.

These themes are not so different from the questions touched on in both areas of new research on anticorruption. Cumulativeness means more than adding older citations or noting contemporary relevance, however. It means thinking hard about what seem to be the fundamentals that underlie (or not) the emergence of the same *specific* issues decades later, in a very different context and under new leaders without Mao's (or Deng's) apparent clout. Analytically, it means interrogating in a nuanced way the groundrules within which Chinese politics continues to be played out. This is a particular sort of research question in itself, it's not surprising it doesn't find its way into specific new research.

6. Other opportunities for cumulativeness. There are other opportunities to link back to older (and comparative) research in the framing of questions in the new research. For example, mapping anticorruption campaign “losers” onto the sorts of networks used in the political selection literature misses the other side of the same question: hundreds of thousands of winners (and survivors) at all levels of the political hierarchy, those who owe their new offices to the loss of office by campaign victims. Minimally, if we theorize that the political effect of the campaign may be similar to its economic effect in inducing risk-averse choices, then we can investigate specific implications of risk aversion in political selection. This is not methodologically simple, but it does have the benefit of shifting the focus to the future.⁴

7. By way of conclusion. Absence of real longitudinal cumulativeness, back to Maoist-era work, is unsurprising and not necessarily a natural fit with all new research on anticorruption in Chinese politics. Absence of horizontal cumulativeness, i.e., across new research, as opposed to self-referencing, is more disappointing. It is, however, useful to recall both the difficulty of real knowledge aggregation and lack of reward for it.

⁴ Full disclosure: this is (very roughly) the research question I am working on with my graduate student Zeren Li.

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