Tackling Corruption through Top-Down Political Campaigns: Assessing China's Anti-Corruption Crackdown under Xi Jinping

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Introduction

Since November 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), under General Secretary Xi Jinping, has implemented a large-scale Anti-Corruption Campaign aiming to eradicate the rampant corruption problem in the Chinese bureaucracy. Unlike previous unsuccessful efforts to curb official corruption in China, Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign is unprecedented in both its scope and intensity. The crackdown has led to large-scale prosecutions across all levels of bureaucracy, ranging from top leaders in the Central Government to street-level bureaucrats at the grassroots level. Official statistics show that over 4 million officials have been prosecuted on corruption charges between 2013 and 2021, which includes 392 officials at or above the provincial level, 17,000 at the county level, and over 616,000 at the township level (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection 2021). According to political scientist Yuen Yuen Ang, the ongoing Anti-Corruption Campaign has become the "longest, widest-ranging, and most penetrative" bureaucratic purge in contemporary Chinese history (Ang 2020, 157-159).

China's Anti-Corruption Campaign is a unique case that potentially challenges the current paradigm of anti-corruption research in multiple ways. Conventional wisdom holds that corruption arises from the *unaccountable exercise of power*. Successful anti-corruption reforms, most scholars believe, require *institutional* efforts to set structural restraints on political power, such as an independent oversight agency, a strong judiciary, and a vibrant civil society. China's political system, on the contrary, seems to lack those necessary conditions for combating corruption: it is a one-party regime where political power is highly centralized, and institutional checks on public officials are weak. Thus, scholars of Chinese politics often tend to believe that the Chinese leadership would have no incentive to implement meaningful anti-corruption reforms because they would inevitably weaken the CCP's monopoly of power. Xi Jinping's large-scale crackdown on corruption since 2012, understandably, has caught many China observers by surprise, and raised a number of questions: is Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign a genuine effort to curb China's corruption problem, or is it a political maneuver to crack down political rivals? How do China's anti-corruption efforts differ from the norms and practices in western-style democracies? More importantly, *can* successful anti-corruption reforms occur in states that lack democratic institutions and strong accountability?

Our paper aims to take a deeper look into the distinctive motivations, strategies, and effects of China's ongoing Anti-Corruption Campaign, in comparison with anti-corruption

efforts made by Western-style democracies. We divide this essay into three parts. First, we provide a brief overview of the corruption problems in the Chinese bureaucracy before Xi's rise to power. We discuss how institutional weaknesses in China's political structure (e.g. weak constraints on officials' power; lack of bureaucratic oversight, and absence of judicial independence) gave rise to rampant corruption, and why previous leaderships in China failed to fully address the problem. We show that the widespread corruption in China prior to the Xi era was not solely caused by the absence of regulatory institutions and tools, but also resulted from a lack of motivation. The Chinese leadership was reluctant to implement strict anti-corruption policies because it might hurt local officials' incentive to promote economic growth.

Next, we offer an in-depth analysis of the patterns, mechanisms, and practices in the implementation of Xi's anti-corruption agenda. We first argue that Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign is a *genuine* effort to preserve the regime's long-term legitimacy and improve the bureaucrats' compliance to Party disciplines, rather than a publicity stunt to boost short-term public support, or a means to suppress political opponents, as some observers have argued. The remainder of this section focuses on the following question: how does China manage to reduce the officials' corrupt behavior without changing the *status quo* in its political and bureaucratic system? We show that, in the absence of a transparent, law-based regulatory framework and strong institutional restraint on power, the Chinese leadership has to rely on a top-down, highly politicized campaign to implement the anti-corruption agenda. We further summarize three distinctive features of this "campaign-style" approach. First, it is highly *arbitrary and irregular*, relying on the frequent use of coercive and sometimes extrajudicial means to deter and prosecute corrupt officials. Second, its narrative is highly politicized, which views an official's corruption not as an ordinary crime, but as a sign of political disloyalty and disobedience to the regime. Last, the anti-corruption efforts are implemented in a strictly top-down, hierarchical manner, and primarily depend on the *upper-level* authorities' ability to surveil and regulate the behaviors of lower-level officials. While anti-corruption reforms in the West often engage a wide range of stakeholders such as NGOs, citizen activists, and media, the Chinese leadership mostly relies on bureaucratic and administrative apparatus to advance its anti-corruption agenda without strong inputs from civil society.

Lastly, we evaluate the effects and consequences of China's Anti-Corruption Campaign. After eight years of implementation, does the campaign actually reduce the amount of corruption

within the Chinese bureaucracy? What impacts have the campaign brought to the political attitudes and behaviors of Chinese officials and citizens? With data and qualitative evidence from the past eight years, we hope to provide preliminary insights into those questions. On the one hand, we argue that China's Anti-Corruption Campaign has so far achieved some success, and has indeed reduced China's corruption problem to a certain extent. On the other hand, China's anti-corruption agenda also faces a number of challenges and obstacles, most of which have resulted from the lack of civic engagement, due process, and transparency during campaign implementation. In the long run, we argue that China will need to strengthen its institutions and regulatory norms to combat corruption in a sustainable way.

Corruption and Anti-Corruption in China: An Overview

Corruption Problems before Xi's Campaign

Official corruption has been an enduring pandemic throughout modern Chinese history. In 1951, only two years after the founding of the People's Republic, Chairman Mao Zedong launched a nationwide crackdown on what he called the "three evils" among Communist Party cadres – corruption, waste, and bureaucratic attitudes (Chung 2016). During the Mao era (1949 – 1976), the most common form of corruption was the embezzlement of public funds by state officials. During that period, China lacked a legal and regulatory framework to enforce anti-corruption policies, and did not have sufficient state capacity to oversee the behaviors of its large cadre force (Liu 1983; Lü 2000). As a result, the regime heavily relied on cruel punishment to deter the bureaucrats' corrupt behavior. For example, Liu Qingshan and Zhang Zishan, two high-ranking officials who co-headed the Party leadership of Tianjin, were accused in 1952 of embezzling a total of 17.16 billion yuan (equivalent to $248,600 in 2022 U.S. dollars[1]) during their tenure (Cheng 2016, 2-3). Liu and Zhang were publicly tried and humiliated in front of a mass assembly, and were executed by a firing squad shortly after the trial (Ibid). Mao considered deterrence as the primary anti-corruption strategy and commented: "we must execute them in order to redeem the 20, 200, 2000, and 20000 cadres who have made mistakes to various

[1] The U.S. dollar equivalence is calculated by the authors based on the historical exchange rates between U.S. dollar and Chinese yuan in 1952 and 2022.

degrees" (Teng 2014). Despite the severe penalty for corruption, China in the 1960s and 1970s still reported frequent cases of embezzlement and bribery, mostly involving local or street-level bureaucrats (Liu 1983).

Corruption in China has been sharply on the rise since 1978, when China began transitioning towards a market-oriented economy. With rapid economic growth and the rise of a bourgeoning private sector, corruption in China has become more widespread and diverse in form and shape (Manion 2004). During the economic transition in the 1980s and 1990s, a majority of corruption resulted from the collusion between public officials and politically-connected private entrepreneurs. For example, in the 1980s, it was a common practice for relatives and cronies of bureaucrats to obtain luxury goods produced by state-owned factories at low prices, and resell them at much higher prices in the market. The "bureaucratic profiteering," or *guan dao*, led to widespread popular grievance, and became a driving force for the Tiananmen Protests in 1989 (Brown 2021). In the late 1990s and early 21st century, China's efforts to privatize its real estate sector and build large-scale infrastructure projects further gave rise to various forms of corruption, including rent-seeking in land sales, illegal kickbacks in real estate development, and collusion between officials and developers in public project bids (Wedeman 2004; Cai, Henderson, and Zhang 2013).

Most scholars agree that corruption has become a rampant problem for China in the early 21st century that has greatly undermined the regime's legitimacy and social stability. Scholars estimate that at least half of China's cadre force in the early 2000s have engaged in at least some form of corruption, and a 2010 poll has shown that 91 percent of respondents agreed that "all rich families in China have political backgrounds" (Bakken and Wang 2021; Da 2020, 346). Moreover, three consecutive surveys conducted by Harvard's Ash Center in 2005, 2007 and 2011 have all shown that nearly half of the citizens viewed local government officials as "unclean" (Cunningham, Saich, and Turiel 2020). As a popular saying in China cynically claims: "there is not a single official who is uncorrupt" (Da 2020, 346).

Institutional Challenges in China's Preexisting Anti-Corruption Framework

Before General Secretary Xi Jinping's rise to power, China's efforts to control and mitigate official corruption had generally been ineffective and inconsequential. The failure of China's anti-corruption measures could be attributed to both *structural* and *motivational* reasons.

On the one hand, there existed no independent agency to carry out anti-corruption oversight and investigation without political interference. On the other hand, the Chinese leadership had little incentive to implement anti-corruption reform in full force, because doing so would incur great economic and administrative costs.

In China's political structure, the most powerful agency responsible for enforcing anti-corruption rules is the Commissions for Discipline Inspection (CDI). As the CCP's internal disciplinary watchdog, CDI has branches operating at all administrative levels, and is responsible for surveilling and investigating the misbehaviors of Party and state officials in the same jurisdiction (Manion 2004; Guo 2014). Any anti-corruption case filed against an official is usually divided into two steps: an internal Party investigation by CDI, and a formal indictment process by the state judiciary.[2] The internal CDI investigation is usually held in high secrecy outside of the normal judicial process. Suspected officials are usually taken into custody in an undisclosed location, where they are required to answer the interrogators' questions within a required period of time, a process known colloquially as *shuanggui* (literally "two requires") (Guo 2017). Once the internal Party investigation is concluded, the suspected official will then be turned over to state prosecutors to be formally indicted for crimes.

As the Party's main anti-corruption watchdog, CDI has long been criticized for its arbitrary, extrajudicial approach to anti-corruption. During the internal Party investigation, suspected officials are often detained in an extrajudicial manner without due process. Although China's criminal law prohibits law enforcement agencies from detaining a criminal suspect for over 48 hours, this rule does not apply to CDI's anti-corruption probe, because it is technically the Party's internal disciplinary organ, rather than a law enforcement agency of the state. According to anecdotal reports, some suspected officials were interrogated continually for weeks and months, and were deprived of their personal freedom and access to legal counsel (Sapio 2008). Furthermore, due to the lack of transparency and oversight during the interrogation process, investigators in some localities reportedly used torture (such as beating and sleep

[2] Theoretically, the CDI is only authorized to investigate cadres who are Party members; in practice, since almost all public officials above a certain rank are Party members, it has become standard practice for CDI to investigate all corruption-related cases.

deprivation) to force the confession of suspected officials (Sapio 2008; 2010, 71–109). In several extreme cases, officials who were suspected of corruption died of beatings during CDI's internal investigations (e.g. The New York Times 2013).

Table 1: Disciplinary Process of Official Corruption in China

Investigation and Punishment within the Party		*State Prosecution and Judicial Process*	
Step 1 Initial CDI Investigation	**Step 2** Intra-Party Disciplinary Interrogation (*shuanggui*)	**Step 3** Transfer to the State Prosecutor	**Step 4** Judicial Indictment
After receiving hints for plausible corruption, CDI opens a case, starts collecting evidence for an official's misdeeds.	If sufficient evidence on one's corruption is uncovered, CDI will place the suspected official on custody in an undisclosed location and interrogate them for an indefinite period of time. If an official is found in violation of Party disciplines, CDI will issue disciplinary measures (such as suspension or revocation of Party membership)	Once intra-Party investigation is concluded, if the official is suspected of further violating state laws, CDI will transfer the detained official and corruption-related evidence to the procuratorate (i.e. state prosecutors) to prepare for formal criminal indictment.	The procuratorate formally indicts the corrupt official in front of a criminal court. A court trial will determine an official's verdict and punishment.

On the other hand, ironically, CDI has also been criticized for its lack of independence and vulnerability to political interference. As political scientist Melanie Manion points out, CDI is not a non-political independent agency like its counterparts in Western countries, but is subordinate to the Party committee at the same level (Manion 2004). Party leaders of a locality not only have the authority to nominate and appoint members of the local CDI, but are also empowered to oversee and influence the ongoing investigation of CDI officials in their jurisdiction. As a result, if local Party leaders or their cronies engage in corruption, the local CDI branch would have little capacity to restrain and punish their behaviors due to their lower, subservient status. During interviews, many CDI inspectors complain that they often face strong pressure from their Party bosses when they attempt to investigate cases that involve members of the local leadership's family or inner circle (Yu 2015). As a result of CDI's inability to prosecute power holders and their cronies, before the Xi era, only a tiny fraction of corrupt higher-level officials were actually prosecuted. According to a 2007 study by political scientist Minxin Pei, the odds of a corrupt official being prosecuted were less than three percent (Pei 2007). As a

retired Chinese politician sarcastically commented, "you cannot expect to use a person's left hand to restrain his own right hand" (Guan 2007, 49).

Lack of Anti-Corruption Motivation

In addition to the institutional factors that undermine anti-corruption efforts in China, another important reason for Beijing's inability to control corruption was the lack of motivation. Previous Chinese leaderships before Xi adopted a passive, half-hearted approach to corruption because, as argued by some scholars, an indiscriminate crackdown on corruption could demoralize local officials and disrupt China's economic development. Studies have shown that many corrupt officials, paradoxically, were competent government managers capable of promoting economic development (Ang 2020, 119-125). Simply put, corruption could create an incentive for officials to seek more business deals with private entrepreneurs that would produce personal benefits and promote economic growth. While rent-seeking behaviors could undermine the Party's legitimacy and political authority, they could also drive bureaucrats to make greater efforts and deliver better economic outcomes (Bai, Hsieh, and Song 2019). As economist Yukon Huang frankly commented, "corruption in China helped to navigate around excessive regulations and controls in an overly centralized bureaucracy; corruption made it easier to do business. Together, it is easy to understand why corruption *facilitated* the growth process rather than impeding it" (Huang 2015). In other words, during a time when economic growth was China's main priority, Beijing could be reluctant to implement strict anti-corruption policies at the expense of hampering its development goals.

Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign: Combatting Power Abuse in a One-Party Regime

When General Secretary Xi Jinping announced the Anti-Corruption Campaign in November 2012, it was greeted with skepticism by observers both inside and outside of China. For a long time, scholars believed that authoritarian regimes were both unable and unwilling to genuine anti-corruption reform, because such an effort would require them to establish accountable institutions which would ultimately undermine the autocrat's monopoly of power (Carothers 2020). Guided by this mindset, most observers of China initially viewed Xi's campaign as nothing more than a political plot to purge rival political factions or a publicity stunt to boost popular support, rather than a good-faith effort to tackle corruption in China. During a group

interview by National Public Radio (NPR) in 2016, most experts expressed doubt on Xi's real intent of launching the campaign, calling it a strategy to win support from China's "graft-weary populace" or an ingenuine attempt to "eliminate covert factions operating inside the Party" (Kuhn 2016). Meanwhile, other scholars predicted that Xi's anti-corruption reform, like the ones pledged by previous Chinese leaderships, would be unlikely to succeed and bring long-term, sustainable changes to the *status quo*. For example, Yuen (2016) argues that Xi's campaign was primarily aimed at "smoothing the way for Xi's political agenda" and therefore would avoid "taking down too many high-ranking officials to the degree that threatens the lifeline of the Party" (Yuen 2014).

After eight years since its launch, Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign has surprised many China observers with its long duration, overarching scale, and great intensity. First, the campaign does not seem to target officials with specific factional ties or backgrounds. Studies have shown that officials who have been indicted on corruption charges come from diverse backgrounds, and one's factional ties do not affect their likelihood of being investigated (Lorentzen and Lu 2018; Aidt, Hillman, and Liu 2020). Moreover, political connections to high-ranking politburo members cannot shield an official immune from prosecution, which implies that Xi's campaign is unlikely to be a politically-motivated crackdown intended to eliminate political rivals (Lorentzen and Lu 2018). Second, rather than a short-term, symbolic effort aimed at boosting public approval, Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign has brought down a significant fraction of officials across all levels of bureaucracy. During the sweeping purge, over 4.09 million officials were prosecuted between 2013 and 2021, including 392 high-ranking leaders on or above the ministry level (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection 2021). Remarkably, the campaign has also broken an informal rule[3] that retired top leaders of the Party should be immune from

[3] The tacit rule, which is frequently referred to as "no criminal penalty for politburo standing member" (*xing bu shang chang*), states that sitting or former members of the Party's politburo standing committee should not be subject to criminal prosecution. In addition to Zhou, other ex-members of the politburo who have been prosecuted during Xi's campaign include Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, both former Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Sun Zhengcai, former Party Secretary of Chongqing Municipality.

prosecution, as can be seen in the indictment of Zhou Yongkang, a former standing member of the politburo (Buckley and Jacobs 2014). Overall, Xi's ongoing campaign has challenged the long-held assumption that anti-corruption is only possible to occur in liberal democracies.

In fact, China's Anti-Corruption Campaign has prompted a debate among scholars on whether and how authoritarian regimes can successfully curb corruption without reforming their political structure. Political scientist Chris Carothers, for example, argues that non-democracies are capable of implementing successful anti-corruption reforms *through their own institutional strengths* (Carothers 2020). Instead of relying on democratic means of controlling corruption, such as strengthening the rule of law or empowering civil society, authoritarian regimes tend to pursue anti-corruption goals using a top-down, centralized approach (Carothers 2020; 2022). In the following section, we will focus on three distinctive features in China's Anti-Corruption Campaign that differs most from anti-corruption strategies in Western democracies.

Politicization and Securitization of Corruption Behavior

One of the most unique features of Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign is the *politicization* and *securitization* of corruption. Rather than viewing corruption simply as an immoral behavior or a violation of law, the authorities frame it as a *political crime* that poses an existential threat to national security and the Party's survival. In Xi's own words, corruption is a sign of one's political disloyalty, and officials who engaged in graft have displayed gross defiance and contempt of the Party line (Xinhua News Agency 2016a). An official editorial from the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) explicitly equates one's corruption with political insubordination: "anti-corruption is a severe political struggle and an urgent life-and-death issue for our Party…Corrupt officials have demonstrated their disloyalty and dishonesty to the Party and have undermined the Party's leadership and unity" (Qu and Xue 2021).

The Chinese authorities, through its control of the propaganda apparatus, have actively promoted a public narrative that denounces corrupt officials as *political enemies* whose wrongdoings have threatened the state's survival. Following the expulsion of each high-ranking official, China's state media will always publish a scathing announcement that uses derogative and humiliating language to condemn the official's wrongdoings. For example, when Lu Wei, the former vice director of China's Internet regulation agency, was arrested on corruption charges in early 2018, the Xinhua News Agency announced that:

According to the investigation, Lu Wei severely violates political disciplines and rules. He complies with the Center's directions in public, but opposes them in the heart. He dares to make arrogant comments on the Center's policies, obstructs the Center's inspection work, uses public power for personal gains, and expands his influence by all means. He is morally degenerate…and has no sense of honor or shame at all.

As a high-ranking cadre of the Party, Lu Wei has completely lost his ideals, political beliefs, and commitment to the Party's principles. He is extremely disloyal to the Center and does not have any awareness to maintain political integrity and uphold disciplines…He is also a typical example of someone whose political wrongdoings overlap with his economic wrongdoings. The nature of his misdeeds is extremely reprehensible and serious…

The public shaming and humiliation of officials, which is based on the presumption of guilt, usually starts *before* one's formal indictment and trial process before the judiciary. As Carothers (2020) points out, while previous Party leadership has allowed corrupt officials to appeal and defend their cases, during Xi's Campaign, formal judicial procedures have given way to the regime's political priority to advance its anti-corruption agenda. As a result, the framing of the Anti-Corruption Campaign as a "political struggle" has left denounced officials with few options, other than confessing to their alleged wrongdoings.

In addition to using highly politicized language to humiliate corrupt officials, Chinese authorities have also engaged in a mass-scale propaganda campaign to promote a political narrative of the Anti-Corruption Campaign. Between 2014 and 2022, the China Central Television has produced eight propaganda TV series to showcase the Party's anti-corruption accomplishments, and ramp up public support for the campaign (Huang 2022).[4] On the one hand, those TV series portray corrupt officials as moral perverts and political enemies who have

[4] Namely, the eight TV series produced by the China Central Television are: *Improvement of Work Style, Always on the Road* (*2014*), *Always on the Road* (2016), *It Takes a Good Blacksmith to Make Steel* (2017), *The Sword of Routine Inspection* (2017), *The Red Notice* (2019), *State Inspection* (2020), *Rectification and Anti-Corruption is Always Here* (2021), and *Zero Tolerance* (2022). Similarly, local state TV channels also made propaganda TV shows focusing on anti-corruption achievements in their respective provinces.

blatantly betrayed their pledges and commitment to the Party and the state. Several episodes include staged self-confessions of corrupt officials, who tearfully repent the wrongdoings they committed, and warned their fellow cadres not to follow their path (Sorace 2019; Carothers 2020). On the other hand, the propaganda also uses the Anti-Corruption Campaign to highlight the Party's commitment and self-sacrifice to the nation. The ongoing crackdown on corruption, according to the state media, shows that the Party have both the determination and capacity to "consistently purify and revolutionize itself" (Cui 2022). In an episode of the propaganda TV program *Always on the Road*, the narrator emotionally claims: "just like we must take a heavy dose of medicine to treat a serious disease, the Party's crackdown on corruption illustrates its determination and courage to make painful adjustments to combat evil" (Xinhua News Agency 2016b). Instead of seeing China's political system as the *cause* of corruption, the authorities assert that a centralized one-party system is the only *solution* to the corruption problem in China.

Top-down Routinized Inspection of Subordinate Officials

During the Anti-Corruption Campaign, the Chinese regime has also intensified top-down surveillance and inspection of lower-level bureaucracy to deter and discipline officials. As mentioned in earlier sections, a major weakness in the Party's disciplinary system is the inability of local disciplinary officers to sanction powerful leaders at the same level. According to a commentary published by the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection, a main difficulty of the Anti-Corruption Campaign is how to effectively oversee local Party chiefs and restrain their excess powers.

Unlike the anti-corruption practice in democracies, the Chinese authorities reject both the idea of an independent disciplinary agency and the role of civic engagement as part of the solution. Instead, the regime attempts to address the problem of unaccountable local leaders using a coercive, top-down approach named "regularized inspection" (*changtaihua xunshi*). Since 2014, the CCP Central Committee has created several "central inspection groups" (*zhongyang xunshizu*) to enforce anti-corruption policies in provincial governments, central government agencies, and major state-owned enterprises (SOE). Each round of disciplinary inspection usually lasts about one or two months, and the destinations of inspection are irregular and undisclosed. As official representatives of the Central Committee, the central inspection groups are endowed with sweeping investigative powers, such as making surprise and unnotified visits to any facility of the targeted agency, summoning and interviewing any public official for

disciplinary violation, and checking the confidential meeting records or personal bank accounts for evidence of corruption. Leaders of inspected provinces or agencies are strictly prohibited from reaching out to inspectors or inquiring about their investigation process. After each round of investigation, the central inspection group will submit a report and corruption-related evidence directly to the central leadership in Beijing (Yeo 2016; Carothers and Zhang 2023).

The central inspection work, which relies on upper-level officials' authority to oversee lower-level bureaucracy in a top-down manner, has become a routine during Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign. Since 2013, the regime has carried out 21 rounds of inspections in total, covering all provinces, central ministries and bureaus, state-funded public institutions, and major state-owned enterprises (see **Table 2**). Those inspections are generally considered to be effective in discovering and curbing corruption of sub-national leaders. Several high-profile provincial politicians, including Sun Zhengcai (former Party Secretary of Chongqing) and Su Shulin (former Governor of Fujian), have been exposed and investigated for corruption during inspections (Zhi 2017).

Table 2. Regularized Central Inspections between 2013 and 2022

Round	Time	No. of Groups	Targets	Inspection Focus
Inspections under the 18th CCP Central Committee				
1st	June–July 2013	10	10 (5 provinces, 1 government agency, 3 state-owned enterprises, 1 state-funded institution*)	General
2nd	Nov – Dec 2013	10	10 (6 provinces, 2 government agencies, 1 state-funded institution, 1 state-owned enterprise)	General
3rd	April – May 2014	13	13 (10 provinces, 1 government agency, 1 state-funded institution, 1 state-owned enterprise)	General
4th	Aug – Sept 2014	13	13 (10 provinces, 1 government agency, 1 state-funded institution, 1 state-owned enterprise)	General
5th	Nov – Dec 2014	13	13 (2 government agencies, 3 state-funded institutions, 8 state-owned enterprises)	General
6th	Mar – April 2015	13	26 state-owned enterprises (each team inspected two organizations)	State-owned enterprises
7th	July – Aug 2015	13	26 (7 government agencies, 2 state-funded institutions, 17 state-owned enterprises)	State-owned enterprises
8th	Nov – Dec 2015	15	31 (8 government agencies, 9 state-funded institutions, 14 state-owned enterprises)	General
9th	Mar – April 2016	15	36 (4 provinces, 28 government agencies, 4 state-funded institutions)	General
10th	July – Aug 2016	15	30 (4 provinces, 21 government agencies, 5 state-funded institutions)	General
11th	Nov – Dec 2016	15	31 (4 provinces, 2 government agencies, 25 state-funded institutions)	General

12th	Mar – April 2017	15	37 (4 provinces, 29 state-funded institutions, 2 government agencies, 2 state-owned enterprises)	Education system
Inspections under the 19th CCP Central Committee (as of July 2022)				
1st	Feb – May 2018	15	30 (16 provinces, 7 government agencies, 6 state-owned enterprises, 1 state-funded institution)	General
2nd	Oct – Nov 2018	15	26 (13 provinces, 11 government agencies, 2 state-owned enterprises)	General
3rd	April – June 2019	15	45 (42 state-owned enterprises, 3 government agencies)	State-owned enterprises
4th	Sep – Nov 2019	15	37 (14 central government agencies, 23 state-funded institutions)	Central-level institutions
5th	May – June 2020	15	35 (17 central government agencies, 17 state-funded institutions, 1 state-owned enterprise)	Central-level institutions
6th	Oct – Dec 2020	15	32 (18 provinces, 12 central government agencies, 2 state-funded institutions)	General
7th	May – June 2021	15	32 (1 central government agency, 31 state-funded institutions)	Education system
8th	Oct – Dec 2021	15	25 (2 central government agencies, 2 state-funded institutions, 21 state-owned enterprises)	Financial system
9th	April – May 2022	15	27 (21 central government agencies, 3 state-funded institutions, 3 state-owned enterprises)	Central-level institutions

Source: Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection.
* *Note:* for the sake of simplicity, "state-funded institutions" refer to both state-sponsored mass organizations (such as the Communist Youth League) and state-funded public institutes such as universities and research institutes.

Leveraging Anti-Corruption in Political Appointment and Promotion

How does the central leadership curb corruption further down the bureaucratic rank, particularly *below* the provincial level? During the Anti-Corruption Campaign, the regime's primary strategy to control corruption by lower-level officials is to link the political career of provincial leaders with the anti-corruption outcomes in their jurisdiction. In other words, provincial leaders who fail to control the corruption of their subordinates at the sub-provincial level could face severe consequences to their own careers. Unlike previous Party leaderships that considers economic growth as the predominant measure of an official's performance, during the Xi era, one's ability to fulfill the Center's anti-corruption targets has become an important criterion for political promotion.

During the campaign, one provincial leader who was removed from office due to his failure to control sub-provincial corruption was Yuan Chunqing, the Party Secretary of Shanxi. In 2014, a central inspection team found that over 11,000 officials in Shanxi engaged in various forms of graft, including 26 prefecture-level officials and 336 county-level leaders (China News 2014). Although no evidence suggested that Yuan was personally involved in any corruption or intentionally shielded his subordinates, he was removed from office due to the "lack of discretion

and oversight over local cadres" (Huang 2014). When commenting on Shanxi's corruption endemic, an editorial published on *The People's Daily* website wrote:

The series of corruption scandals in Shanxi is a result of the lack of discretion and oversight in the appointment and management of cadres. The top leaders of Shanxi must bear responsibility for this failure, which is the reason for Yuan Chunqing's departure. In addition to the Provincial Party Secretary himself, Shanxi's Commission for Disciplinary Inspection and Organizational Department must also bear some blame. (Huang 2014)

In fact, Yuan Chunqing was not the only provincial leader who was disciplined due to their failure to control their subordinates' misdeeds. In 2013, several local officials in Liaoning Province were involved in a mass-scale bribery scandal that received national backlash. Wang Junlian, a top provincial leader responsible for anti-corruption enforcement in Liaoning, was similarly punished for her "negligence" in detecting and preventing local officials' corrupt behavior (Wang 2017). As those examples have shown, the regime has relied on a top-down, hierarchical approach, and imposed strong pressure on subnational leaders to accomplish the Center's anti-corruption objectives.

Effects and Consequence of the Campaign

Has the Anti-Corruption Campaign indeed increased the compliance of officials to the Party line and discipline? Recent scholarly works on the Anti-Corruption Campaign mainly focus on its effectiveness and economic consequences. Most scholars agree that Xi's crackdown on corruption, to some extent, has been effective in curbing rent-seeking and graft in the bureaucracy. Carothers (2020), for example, evaluates Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign using a scoring system, and finds that the campaign has actually yielded better results than most anti-corruption efforts in other countries. Recent research also shows that provinces whose top leaders have been recently replaced by Xi show a significant reduction in corruption (Chen and Kung 2019). The campaign has also led to a significant decrease in the public consumption of luxury goods and extravagant wines, which are common vehicles for bribery (Ke, Liu, and Tang 2017; Qian and Wen 2015; Shu and Cai 2017). Furthermore, the campaign has also led to a visible decline in the illegal exchange of favors between politicians and entrepreneurs. On the

one hand, local leaders are much less likely to offer unfair price discounts in land sales to firms connected to the family members of top Party leaders (Chen and Kung 2019); on the other hand, government subsidies to firms with strong political connections have also sharply declined (Xu and Yano 2017). Connection to powerful politicians, previously thought as a means for private entrepreneurs to protect their properties, can now lead to greater political risks and market volatility of their businesses during the campaign (Wang 2017; Liu and Ying 2019).

The socioeconomic impacts of Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign are mixed and ambiguous so far. Recent studies show that the campaign has improved firm performance, led to more efficient allocation of corporate resources, and reduced operational costs for private enterprises (Giannetti et al. 2021; Griffin, Liu, and Shu 2016). Additionally, as a result of the crackdown on favoritism, firms tend to invest more in research and development (R&D) activities, while spending less on building political connections (Xu and Yano 2017). Yet, not all scholars agree that the Anti-Corruption Campaign has a positive impact on the Chinese economy. There is also strong evidence that the crackdown on corruption has a negative impact on GDP growth and investment, because the strict rules set by Beijing make local officials cautious and reluctant to make public investments (Araral et al. 2017). Furthermore, intensive top-down monitoring can reduce the productivity of bureaucrats by frightening them away from the informal practices that they rely on to promote economic growth (Wang 2022). Still, as an ongoing campaign, the long-term socioeconomic impacts of Xi's anti-corruption crackdown remain to be seen.

Conclusion: Rethinking Anti-Corruption Practices Using China's Example

China's unorthodox Anti-Corruption Campaign under General Secretary Xi Jinping offers an opportunity for researchers to reconsider the scholarly consensus on the factors that contribute to successful anti-corruption reforms. For the most part, China's strategies and practices in tackling corruption is the clear opposite of those implemented in Western democracies. Instead of viewing anti-corruption as a non-political task which should be governed by an independent agency, the Chinese authority considers it as a political mission that must be kept under the Party's strict control. Rather than seeing corruption as the result of unlimited and unrestrained power, China has further centralized the Party's power to increase surveillance and control over subordinate officials. Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign, in some sense, has challenged conventional wisdom in anti-corruption reform and practice.

Our article, however, is not an endorsement of the coercive means and arbitrary practices in China's Anti-Corruption Campaign. As mentioned earlier, Beijing's efforts to tackle corruption has unfortunately led to enormous social and economic costs. Undoubtedly, the extrajudicial detention of suspected officials, denial of their right to appeal and seek legal counsel, and forced self-confession have all undermined the rule of law in China. Moving forward, we argue that Beijing will need to strike a balance between enforcing its anti-corruption agenda and upholding its legal and judicial framework.

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