Power Struggle or Strengthening the Party: Perspectives on Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign

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Abstract

This review essay analyzes the literature dealing with Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign. It identifies two major debates in the literature that see the campaign either as an inner-Party power struggle or as a genuine attempt to deal with the problem of corruption and organizational issues the Party is facing. In a second step, the review essay links these two understandings to larger trends in the understanding of the Chinese Communist Party in the literature. These understandings focus either on elite politics and theories of factionalism or connect to the larger debate on the decline versus resilience of the Party. It concludes that different understandings of Xi's campaign are not mutually exclusive but adopt different points of focus and are rooted in different debates on the Chinese Communist Party.

Keywords Chinese Communist Party · Anticorruption and party discipline · Power struggle · Xi Jinping

Introduction

When the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) resumed its work after the Cultural Revolution, its newly elected Chairman Chen Yun stated at one of its first meetings that “The question of the work style of the ruling party is a question of life and death, of existence for that party.” [1]. A number of other high-ranking Chinese leaders have since then repeated this statement and leaders like Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and more recently Xi Jinping have also referred to Party work style, in particular corruption, as a “life and death issue for the Party” ([2], p. 131; [3]). Tackling what Chinese leaders are referring to as a “life and death issue” has been the topic of repeated campaigns

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targeting corruption since the early 1980s. In late 2012, Xi Jinping launched another anticorruption campaign that is still ongoing and that has so far brought down a significant number of cadres at all levels of the Party hierarchy as well as in the military.

However, despite the fact that Xi's campaign has been under way since the end of 2012, there is still considerable debate in the literature as to what the goals, structures and characteristics of the campaign are. This is possibly also due to the fact that the campaign unites a number of different aspects and foci as well as targeted groups (for example the military as a targeted group at some stage of the campaign, or the focus on ideological deviance and education). All these different aspects make up what we refer to as Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign. Depending on the aspect we focus on, we might reach different conclusions as to what it is about and how it can enrich our understanding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an institution. This review essay discusses two major lines in the debate on Xi's anticorruption campaign: the understanding of the campaign as a power struggle and the understanding of the campaign as a tool to fight corruption and increase the organizational strength of the Party. After discussing these two possible understandings of the campaign, I embed them into the literature on the Chinese Communist Party as a governing organization and identify the debates that the analysis of the current campaign relates to. This allows for a more nuanced understanding not only of the campaign, but also of the lessons we might be able to draw from it for analyzing the Party itself.

The Anticorruption Campaign under Xi Jinping

Particularly the fall of a number of high-ranking cadres in Party and military such as Zhou Yongkang, Ling Jihua, Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou has fueled debates that a power struggle within the CCP is carried out in the guise of an anticorruption campaign ([4–8]. While Xi himself said during a state visit to the United States in 2015 that the anticorruption campaign is not a “‘House of Cards’-style power struggle” [9], the possibility of a power struggle within the CCP carried out in disguise of the anticorruption campaign is evident. Willy Lam even went so far as to speculate whether the arrest of Zhou Yongkang in July 2014 could mark a slowdown in the campaign because an alleged high-ranking enemy of Xi was arrested [5]. To evaluate these claims, Andrew Wedeman disentangled the different threads of the campaign to answer the question whether it is an honest effort to root out corruption or a power struggle within the CCP ([10], p.39). In order to do this, Wedeman relies on a comparison with Stalin's Great Purge among the ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the 1920s and 1930s, and argues that “rather than treat the purge as a political pathology prone to degeneration into witch hunting, we need to disaggregate a ‘purge’ into its component parts and try to discern the specific object of each part, recognizing that different parts many have different objectives” ([10], p. 46). Wedeman uses Procuratorate data on the numbers of officials fallen victim to the campaign including detailed backgrounds and assumed factional alignments of high-ranking officials brought down by Xi's campaign. His analysis leads him to conclude that the anticorruption campaign is a purge in line with the case of the Soviet Union, i.e. “a concerted effort to cleanse the party and state of malefactors” ([10], p. 53). However, he

does not see it primarily as a witch hunt against political enemies. While the campaign arguably strengthens Xi's personal power, Wedeman sees the campaign more as politically motivated in an organizational sense, attempting to prevent corruption from spiraling out of control and reinstating at least a basic sense of discipline among the ranks of the Communist Party ([10], pp. 69 f.).

While Wedeman concedes that the campaign is a purge, albeit at least partially driven by organizational concerns, other authors focus more strongly on the behavioral issues that the CCP is facing. Minxin Pei discusses corruption among CCP and state cadres that the Party perceives as a persistent problem. He defines this as crony capitalism: "an institutional union between capitalists and politicians designed to allow the former to acquire wealth, legally or otherwise, and the latter to seek and retain power" ([11], p. 7) and more specifically as "collusion among elites" ([11], p. 7). Pei diagnoses institutional reforms that began in the 1990s as the root cause of elite collusion and related widespread corruption in the PRC. Firstly, he identifies the partial and incremental reform of property rights, for example in the area of state-owned enterprises and land, as providing the opportunities and incentives for elite collusion and hence crony capitalism. Secondly, he names administrative decentralization in the process of reforms as providing the capacity for officials to engage in elite collusion and crony capitalism because it allows them to make use of the opportunities provided by the incomplete reform of property rights. With decision-making decentralized to lower levels, it is significantly easier to reap the windfall profits generated in the process of the piecemeal privatization of state assets. Therefore, he argues that "our research identifies the institutional flaws of the Leninist party-state, not the moral failings of its members, as the root cause of regime decay" ([11], p. 217). Pei's argument hence clearly identifies institutional flaws coupled with incomplete or insufficient reforms as the reason why crony capitalism occurs and why, according to him, the Chinese Party-state is slowly being hollowed out by its own cadres. In this argument, Xi's anticorruption campaign is obviously dealing with a real and imminent danger for the Party-state that is posed by rampant corruption. However, it follows from this argument that further institutional reforms would be required to thoroughly deal with the root causes of the problem. In this view, a campaign-style approach to anticorruption would only have a limited longer-term effect curbing corruption and elite collusion.

In contradiction, Macabe Keliher and Wu Hsinchao argue that Xi's campaign consists of three parts, and one of the elements, anticorruption, is not new but has been part of earlier campaigns conducted by the CCP ([12], p. 8). While they acknowledge that there are new elements to Xi's anticorruption drive, such as the extent of the campaign as well as discussion of experimentation with anticorruption zones and amnesty ([12], p. 10), they still hold that anticorruption campaigns as such are not a new phenomenon. Additionally, they find that administrative reform in order to address "the lack of autonomy of anticorruption agencies, and the lack of clear organizational anticorruption procedures and regulations" ([12], p. 11) are new elements. This problem is addressed in the anticorruption campaign with reforms that expand the mandate and institutional structures and capabilities of the CCDI. In addition to institutional reform, the CCP must change administrative norms, or what they call "moral guidelines and disciplinary regulations" ([12], p. 13). They argue that "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 patronage into deviant practices that would make the culprit an outsider.” ([12], p. 14). Based on this analysis, Keliher and Wu show how Xi aims to develop and instill into cadres new moral regulations aiming for loyalty and obedience to the Party ([12], p.14). Keliher and Wu conclude that the campaign is not to deliver personal power but aims for no less than a change of cadre behavior and of norms and the larger political culture.

Ling Li makes a similar argument in her analysis of Xi’s ideological and disciplinary campaign. Compared with earlier campaigns in the post-Maoist period, she sees a paradigm change at work that includes “first, the reversal of the depoliticization process of the Party’s disciplinary regime; second, the retention of temporarily mobilized anticorruption resources; and third, the simplification of evidence production procedure” ([13], p. 63). The latter two concern institutional and legal changes associated with the campaign and the strength of enforcement institutions and are in line with Keliher’s and Wu’s finding of an expansion of the mandate and strengthened institutional structures and capabilities of the CCDI. Li discusses in a detailed manner the expansion of mandate and resources of the CCDI and how these resources have been retained and seemingly regularized. At the same time, the first element of the paradigm change she diagnoses also resonates clearly with Keliher’s and Wu’s idea of a change of political culture. The repoliticization of Party discipline that Li refers to is a clear sign of such a change and it points to a new quality of enforcement of Party discipline and the handling of the relationship between the Party and its members.

While Keliher and Wu acknowledge the existence of an element of moral regulation in Xi’s campaign and argue that a goal of it is a change of political culture and Li attests a reversal of the depoliticization of Party discipline, this argument is taken even further by authors such as Kerry Brown and Christian Sorace. While Brown acknowledges that the campaign has probably also been a useful tool for Xi to remove some of his opponents ([14], p. 7), he argues that this is not the prime goal of the anticorruption campaign. Quite on the contrary and similar to Wedeman he believes that the overarching goal of the campaign is a political one. According to Brown, it is more useful to see the campaign as “a political instrument for forging a new Party identity and morality” ([14], p. 7). In a similar argument and based on his analysis of confession documents, Christian Sorace holds that cadre confessions serve the Party’s purpose of enhancing what he calls “affective sovereignty” defined to mean that “the party-state claims sovereign jurisdiction over people’s emotional life and that the party-state’s sovereignty is revitalized through its extraction of affective energy” ([15], p. 150). Through the process of confession, cadres ritually submit to the moral discourse of the Party that they had breached with their behavior and thereby strengthen this discourse and the moral authority and overall legitimacy of the Party. The arguments of Brown and Sorace are closely connected because they provide a similar understanding of the mechanisms of the anticorruption campaign. They focus on ideological elements and education (Brown) and the interaction of the Party with its members in a ritualistic manner (Sorace). The similarity of these ideas lies in the underlying understanding of the Party and the problems it is faced with. Already Keliher and Wu argued that one of the main goals of the campaign is a change in political culture of the Party and Li attests a repoliticization of Party discipline. This analytical approach understands the

campaign as dealing with organizational issues that are not limited to corruption. They argue that the campaign includes a less tangible approach focused on ideological education, the ritualistic admission of guilt and the reinforcement of norms that aims for strengthening the organizational and political culture of the Party and for binding Party members to the Party. At the same time, the Party still struggles with issues of rampant corruption as Pei discussed in his volume. We can therefore sum up these understandings of Xi's campaign as an effort to "fix the Party" or to say it in the words of Brown "there is a simple reason why the struggle has been so fierce and so prolonged. It is a fight for the very soul of the Party [...]" ([14], p. 9).

At first sight, these two understandings of the anticorruption campaign seem incompatible with each other. On the one hand is the understanding of the campaign as a power struggle to increase Xi Jinping's personal power in the Party. On the other hand is the idea of the anticorruption campaign as a genuine attempt to deal with organizational issues that the Party is facing. However, this seeming contradiction can be better understood if we look beyond discussions of the campaign and embed it into the literature on organizational structures and the inner workings of the CCP.

Making Sense of the CCP in the Literature

The two interpretations of the anticorruption campaign – a power struggle to increase Xi's personal power or a genuine attempt to "fix" the Party – are embedded in different trends and foci of analysis in the literature.

Factionalism and Xi's Grab for Power

For the debate of the anticorruption campaign as a tool in factional struggles, two strands in the literature are most important. The first one is research work focusing on factionalism in the CCP and the second one are academic publications trying to come to terms with Xi Jinping as a political leader. Regarding factionalism, Joseph Fewsmith summarized and commented on the debates of factionalism, applying its arguments to leadership relations in the Maoist and immediate post-Maoist period [16]. He concludes that a more in-depth analysis of factions is required that is also open to the idea that there could be different sorts of factions ([16], p. 131). Additionally, he makes a case for returning to the analysis of issues that according to him used to be at the origin of studying factionalism. These are the questions of what "their existence, if they exist, tell us about the Chinese political system" ([16], p.121) and whether and how they may have changed. Other recent approaches to factionalism for example by Victor Shih and Franziska Barbara Keller aim to map factional networks with the help of social network analysis [17, 18] in order to better understand the linkages and possible factional alliances between political leaders. While this is a promising approach that allows for an improved understanding of elite relations in the CCP, due to limitations in available data this approach is restricted to the highest-ranking leadership of the CCP. In the case of Keller's analysis and also Shi's database this analysis focuses on leaders at the level of the Central Committee and above. Therefore, this approach cannot be applied to lower levels of Party members and cadres (the "flies" in Xi's campaign) to validate the claim of the entire campaign being a factional power struggle. Additionally, even if we

are able to describe factional networks within the Party with relative accuracy, corruption is still a criminal and therefore clandestine undertaking that is usually only available with sufficient data for scholarly analysis once it has been exposed. It is difficult to impossible to gather data on corrupt behavior while it is taking place. However, to argue for the entire campaign to be a factional power struggle, we would have to also be able to provide counter-evidence and describe how a cadre who might be equally corrupt to the one who was punished was spared from punishment because of his or her factional alignments. This is difficult to impossible due to the clandestine nature of corruption.

Despite these methodological challenges, the campaign is often portrayed as a factional power struggle and a means to increase Xi Jinping's personal power. This argument is closely connected to how Xi Jinping is perceived as a political leader. In the literature on Xi's ascent style of rulership, two elements stand out. The first one is the centralization of power at the top of the Party-state that Xi undertook. Lee Sangkuk develops this argument in an article focusing on the institutional parameters of Xi's centralization of power, particularly the trend towards establishing leading small groups [19]. Lee argues that Xi undertook a rearrangement of formal institutions to outmaneuver these and allow for a centralized, top-down coordination of reforms while circumventing the principle of division of work in collective leadership. Other authors also discuss the increased centralization of power in the Xi Jinping era and link it to the second aspect: the discussion of Xi as a Mao-like figure [20, 21]. However, they do not only cite the centralization of power as an indicator for comparing Xi to Mao but also Xi's increased emphasis on ideological campaigns and political loyalty. While not directly comparing Xi Jinping to Mao, in their analysis of the antiwaste campaign launched immediately after Xi came to power, Zhu et al. argue that the campaign is a means of signaling Xi's personal power to other political actors because "bearing audience costs and mobilizing personal networks within a formal institution to achieve policy goals constitute a credible method for signaling a leader's power base to allies" ([22], p. 342).

While the analysis of factional networks and the understanding of Xi Jinping's behavior as a political leader provide important contextual information, they have a clear and limited analytical focus. Therefore, they can only provide an explanation for certain elements of the anticorruption campaign. As outlined above, the literature of factionalism largely focuses on elite relations within the Chinese Communist Party and has difficulties contributing insights on the workings of the campaign at lower levels due to methodological challenges. This does not mean that the campaign cannot be understood as a power struggle and attempt to increase Xi's personal power. However, we have to acknowledge that this is only one aspect of analyzing the campaign and other ways of analysis focusing on other aspects of the campaign can exist at the same time and even be complementary. As Wedeman concedes, factional considerations play a role in the campaign, but at the same time he holds that the number of Party members and cadres taken down for issue of corruption cannot solely be explained with the help of factionalist considerations. Quite on the contrary, he argues that other political considerations, i.e. the cleansing of the Party of corrupt and politically damaging members, are a more important element to the anticorruption campaign.

“Fixing the Party” and What it Tells us about the CCP

Another strand of the literature sees the campaign not primarily as a means of factional infighting and of enhancing Xi Jinping’s personal power but as a genuine effort to deal with organizational issues of the Party. These organizational issues have two different aspects. One aspect is the issue of Party members and cadres abusing public power for private gain, commonly known as corruption. It is this organizational issue that Pei describes in his monograph. However, Pei is not the only author discussing issues of corruption in the PRC. Wedeman analyzes corruption in the PRC and provides an explanation for the apparent contradiction between rampant corruption and the persistent high rates of economic growth in the PRC [23]. Wedeman argues that the sequencing of economic reforms in China allowed for officials to make windfall profits particularly in the process of economic reform and privatization of state-owned property in the 1990s. However, these profits according to Wedeman fed off the privatization process rather than becoming kleptocratic and cutting into the backbone of the economy. This sequencing of reforms is similar to the explanation that Pei provides for the development of crony capitalism. Additionally, Wedeman argues that the Chinese government has at all times undertaken anticorruption measures that prevented the degeneration of corruption into purely kleptocratic acts, even though it proved incapable to fully control corruption. While Wedeman analyzes corruption in the PRC to answer the question why high levels of corruption co-exist with high rates of economic growth, another recent edited volume by Fang Qiang and Li Xiaobing offers an analysis of corruption in a historical perspective [24]. The volume combines chapters on corruption in dynastic China, namely the Han, Tang and Qing dynasties, with the analysis of corruption and anticorruption in Republican, Maoist and post-Mao China. With this wide historical focus, the editors want to argue that “corruption often appears in a variety of forms and in many fields” and that it is an ongoing problem throughout Chinese history. We can therefore conclude that corruption is an ongoing organizational issue in the CCP that, according to Wedeman, Fang and Li et al. and also Keliher and Wu, the Party has been battling for many years. Therefore, anticorruption is seen in the literature as an ongoing element of the Party’s attempts at increasing its organizational strength.

On the contrary, the second element in the literature on corruption and discipline issues in China and the CCP focuses not only on corruption as a monetary and criminal issue. Moving beyond corruption, it considers much more far-reaching forces at work. While the contributions to academic debate that were discussed above mainly deal with the issue of corruption, this second element deals more generally with what the Party calls Party discipline. This literature is not solely looking at monetary corruption as an issue for the organizational cohesion of the CCP, but its focus are broader organizational aspects of the CCP. Among the works introduced above, the clearest examples on this broader focus beyond corruption are the articles by Sorace and Brown. Both of them do not see anticorruption solely as a power struggle. They do not even argue that the most important goal of anticorruption is the elimination of corruption. According to them, deeper forces are at work that aim at recreating the Party as a political organization. What is aimed for is no less than “fixing” the Party as an organization after decades of economic reform and insufficient discipline.

Such an understanding of Xi's anticorruption campaign goes beyond the idea that the only issue is bribery and waste of public resources among Communist Party members and cadres. It considers the stakes of the campaign to be a lot higher and it therefore touches upon the understanding of the CCP as an organization. A number of recent publications focus on this question of how exactly the Party works, both internally and in interaction with other parts of the Chinese state, society and the military. Different aspects of how the Party works internally, e.g. regarding the management of human resources, the role of Party chiefs or Party spirit, are discussed in contributions to the edited volume by Zheng and Gore [25]. Further contributions to this volume discuss the Party's relations with Party-external actors, e.g. the military, the legislative and the judiciary or business elites. The editors hold that the goal of their volume is to "get a glimpse of the evolutionary dynamics of the CCP so that more informed assessment of its prospects and political change in China can be made" ([25], p. 6). They thereby position their contribution within the larger debate on the future of the CCP and "authoritarian resilience" [26] versus decline.

In addition to this type of analysis that considers both institutional structures of the Party and its interaction with Party-external actors, there is yet a different understanding of the Party in the literature. It is closely connected to Xi's anticorruption and Party discipline campaign and more closely in line with the contributions of Brown and Sorace discussed above. Authors subscribing to this approach focus more on the ideological narratives and discourses of the Party and the effects these are supposed to have on Party members and to a certain extent Chinese citizens. In a recent monograph, Brown argues that he wants to overcome "the dichotomy between the Party's inner language and the language of the world about it" ([27]; p. 13) by analyzing the Party's own language and self-understanding. Brown identifies a historic, a moral, an ideological and an aesthetic narrative that are organized around the promise of the Party to deliver justice and redemption for the injustices China suffered at the hands of Western powers. He suggests a framework for understanding the CCP that "is that of a quasi-religious organization, answering a series of ethical and metaphysical questions which other political entities often steer clear of" ([27], p. 19). Frank Pieke offers a similar religiously inspired framework for understanding the Party [28]. Pieke focuses his analysis on red tourism and cadre training in China and argues that "communist civil religion is not a system of ideas, but a set of practices that produce a habitus of unquestioned belief in the naturalness and normalcy of the rule of the CCP *without* requiring an explicit belief in the rectitude and truth of the Party's ideology and mission and in what it says and does" ([28], p. 710). The same argument of understanding the CCP in a religious framework also appears in Pieke's contribution to the edited volume of Zheng and Gore [30]. The basis of these arguments referring to the CCP as a religious organization lies in analyzing the Party's ideological constructs and attempting to understand their effects. This task has become particularly urgent after Xi launched his anticorruption and Party discipline campaign because these efforts also included renewed ideological indoctrination. Therefore, our understanding and analysis of the CCP as an organization and of its ideology is closely connected to the analysis of Xi's Party discipline campaign. As John Dotson states in an analysis of the new five-year plan for cadre training "The time is long overdue to take seriously the foundational worldview of CCP leaders and their pronouncements on ideology" ([29], p. 7). This renewed emphasis on the connection between Party discipline enforcement and

ideological education and conformity make the contributions of Brown and Pieke particularly interesting for analyzing the Xi's campaign. It is in line with the idea that the campaign is not only a power struggle but that it aims for a far greater goal: fixing issues of organizational strength and coherence that the Party is facing.

Conclusion

In the discussion above, I outlined two main arguments on Xi's anticorruption and Party discipline campaign. A first group of scholars assumes that a core element of the campaign is a power struggle at the top of the Party that serves to strengthen Xi's personal power. This argument relates to the theoretical debates on how to analyze factionalism as well as a growing body of literature trying to come to terms with Xi as a political leader and his position in the CCP. It can mainly contribute to the analysis of elite relations within the Party and shed light on corruption cases of high-ranking Party cadres and the position of Xi Jinping within the institutional and factional system of the Party. However, its use in analyzing the entire campaign, including the large numbers of "flies" that were punished throughout the campaign, is limited due in part to methodological challenges.

A second group of scholars argues that the campaign has more far-reaching goals and aims for fixing issues of organizational strength and coherence of the Party. While anticorruption is seen as part of this undertaking, ideological education and Party discipline enforcement is increasingly discussed as a core part of the campaign. This analysis has a different focus than the understanding of the campaign as a power struggle. It is less concerned with elite relations in the Party and is more closely connected to the debate of resilience or decline of the CCP. In line with this understanding of the campaign is a trend in the literature to refocus the analysis of the CCP and pay increasing attention to the CCP's ideological concepts and the role they play for organizational functioning of the Party. The framework of the Party as a quasi-religious organization that both Brown and Pieke suggest certainly points in the direction of a different understanding of the Party as a consequence of the changed political environment under Xi.

To conclude, it makes sense to treat the different understandings of Xi's campaign as focusing on different aspects and relating to different analytical concepts, rather than seeing them as incompatible. If we understand the campaign as consisting of different parts with different mechanisms and goals, this might be an analytically more fruitful and promising approach than considering the different aspects as mutually exclusive.

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