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CONSOLIDATED POLITICAL POWER IN THE
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**POWER TO XI: HOW XI JINPING CONSOLIDATED
POLITICAL POWER IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF
CHINA**

by

Phillip M. Ramirez

June 2019

Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Michael A. Glosny
Christopher P. Twomey

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**POWER TO XI: HOW XI JINPING CONSOLIDATED POLITICAL POWER IN
THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

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BA, Harvard University, 2018

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(FAR EAST, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE PACIFIC)**

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ABSTRACT

In March 2018, the Chinese National People's Congress voted to abolish presidential term limits, paving the way for Chinese President Xi Jinping to rule the country indefinitely. This decision was but one part of a broader trend of power centralization taking place within the People's Republic of China. Driven by Xi's desire to centralize power in himself and in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this trend has reversed the institutionalization of several rules and norms in Chinese politics, begging the question: How exactly was Xi able to overcome decades of momentum to bring about significant changes within the Chinese political system? In this thesis, I test two possible explanations for Xi's success. First, I examine the possibility that Xi leveraged a strong desire among many members of the CCP to restart political and economic reforms within the country in order to persuade the party to back his political changes. Second, I test the idea that Xi has paved the way for his changes in the political sphere by using his anti-corruption campaign to purge political opponents from the CCP and to silence others. Using the best available evidence, I conclude that the preponderance of evidence indicates that Xi utilized both these methods to strengthen his personal power and reverse the trend of institutionalization in the Chinese political system, but the changes Xi has brought to the Chinese political system could not have been possible without the support of the CCP as a whole.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMC	Central Military Commission
CCYL	Chinese Communist Youth League
GCF	Global Financial Crisis
NPC	National People's Congress
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PSC	Politburo Standing Committee
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	renminbi (Chinese currency)
WTO	World Trade Organization

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I. A CHANGING CHINA

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION AND MAIN FINDINGS

In March of 2018, the People’s Republic of China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) voted to abolish presidential term limits, removing the only legal, temporal limit on the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) highest office thereby paving the way for current President Xi Jinping to rule the country indefinitely. The decision is reflective of a broader trend presently occurring within the Chinese socioeconomic and political spheres —the centralization of the power and the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within President Xi Jinping himself.¹ Such a trend represents a clear break with the previous decades, during which Chinese leaders, starting with Deng Xiaoping, implemented a program of political and economic reform that dramatically changed the Chinese political-economic system. In the political sphere in particular, Deng and his successors oversaw the institutionalization of rules and norms meant to govern the burgeoning system of collective leadership.² Collective leadership—“a system with a division of responsibilities among individual leaders in an effort to prevent arbitrary decision-making by a single top leader”—was Deng’s political answer to the arbitrary, unpredictable, and personalistic rule of his predecessor, Mao Zedong.³ Hoping to prevent the uncertainty, chaos, and economic disaster that defined the worst of the Maoist period, Deng attempted to develop a system of governance that would prevent any one person from amassing such a large amount of political power.⁴

¹ Alice Lyman Miller, “Only Socialism Can Save China; Only Xi Jinping Can Save Socialism,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 56 (May 17, 2018), <https://www.hoover.org/research/only-socialism-can-save-china-only-xi-jinping-can-save-socialism>.

² Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018) 10-12.

³ Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016). 13.

⁴ Richard Baum, “The Road to Tianamen: Chinese Politics in the 1980s,” in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 337–467.

For roughly three decades, it appeared that the process of institutionalizing the rules and norms of collective leadership was working smoothly. Top leaders in the CCP served out their full terms, peacefully leaving their offices at the appropriate age or after the conclusion of their term, to be replaced by a new generation of leaders chosen by consensus within the upper echelons of the CCP.⁵ Yet despite the indications that the rules and norms promoted by Deng had been institutionalized in the Chinese political system, Xi has been able to reverse some of these innovations and amass substantial amounts of political power. Most prominently, the recent abolition of the term-limits on the PRC's Presidency combined with Xi's decision not to nominate his successor to the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of China suggests that he will not be giving up power at the Twentieth Party Congress in 2022 in accordance with the norms surrounding his office and his age.⁶ While the motives behind Xi's moves to centralize power may only truly be known to Xi himself, the question of how Xi was able to expand and centralize the power of the CCP remains to be answered. How exactly was Xi Jinping able to centralize political power in the CCP and why does there appear to be so little opposition to this dramatic break with the past?

To answer this question, I tested two explanations concerning Xi's centralization of political power. First, I evaluated the view that the CCP backed or even encouraged Xi to consolidate political power in the PRC within himself, searching for evidence that, one, the CCP had ample reason to be dissatisfied with the system of collective leadership and, two, they acted on those grievances. Second, I evaluated the anti-corruption campaign to determine if Xi leveraged the campaign to gain power over his political opponents, searching for evidence of political patterns within the anti-corruption campaign itself and evidence that the campaign has silenced criticisms of Xi. Ultimately, although there is evidence to support both these explanations, I assess that the changes Xi brought to the Chinese political system could not have come about without support from other members of the CCP. While the anti-corruption campaign has certainly targeted those who, for

⁵ Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (February 5, 2003): 6–17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2003.0019>.

⁶ Miller, "Only Socialism Can Save China; Only Xi Jinping Can Save Socialism" 7.

political reasons, do not want to see power concentrated in Xi as a person, there seems to be a broad consensus within the party that, in order to continue tough economic reform in the country, political power within the PRC has to be concentrated on a single, powerful individual.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Understanding exactly how Xi consolidated power in the PRC and in the CCP is significant both for those who wish to thoroughly understand the PRC and for the broader academic discussion concerning institutions and their formation. With respect to the former, Xi's political moves have come at a time of great transition for the PRC. Economically, the country is in the process of transitioning from a middle-income economy to a high-income, fully developed economy, and, diplomatically and militarily, the country has risen to the center of the world stage, alarming many other major nations across the world, especially the United States. However, such changes do not happen in a vacuum; they all link back to and indeed may be rooted in the political program Xi has chosen to pursue. Understanding how China has moved into the twenty-first century requires understanding how Xi has guided China there.

As China moves along the path Xi has charted, an understanding of Xi's political program will also inform those who wish to know whether the country and its ruling party will be successful in the future. For some, Xi's political program is the exact opposite of what is necessary to successfully move the PRC into the future, a centralized and repressive authoritarianism at a time when movement toward a more open and democratic system would be better for the country's long-term success.⁷ The upper echelons of the CCP certainly know that many are bearish that Xi's power consolidation will move the country in the right direction but have encouraged Xi to move ahead anyway or, at the very least, they have been forced into it. Understanding how Xi amassed enough power within the party to go ahead with his power-consolidating reforms will help shine a light into the

⁷ David L. Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2016), 124-136.

workings of the CCP and may lead to better predictions about its future and therefore the future of the PRC as a whole.

Xi's power consolidation also brings into question the broader discussion about how informal rules and norms are institutionalized across countries. Before Xi, some viewed the political process within the CCP as being highly institutionalized, a crucial cornerstone of the explanations for the exceptionally resiliency of the Chinese regime.⁸ Yet Xi's actions seem to have turned that explanation on its head. Understanding how Xi consolidated power will answer the question of exactly what it takes to overturn what were thought to be robust institutions or, separately, the question of how institutionalized the rules and norms governing the CCP were in the first place. At a time when political actors seem to be challenging and overturning rules, norms, and even institutions themselves, analyzing how Xi overcame rules and norms in China will undoubtedly be significant to the broader questions concerning the robustness of institutions and the institutionalization of rule and norms in other countries.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the rise of Xi Jinping in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Chinese political system has entered a dynamic period. The system of collective leadership, the formation of which had been the dominant trend in Chinese political culture over the past three decades, is being challenged by a political system of centralized leadership. Reforms that were meant to liberalize the economy and perhaps eventually the political system have been replaced with reforms meant to bring power back to those at the center of the CCP. For some, a repressive spell reminiscent of the Mao era has descended over the PRC.⁹ The ideology, the propaganda, and the way power is being wielded at the top all mirror the time when the former chairman of the CCP was the unquestionable ruler of the PRC. Except this time, it is Xi Jinping, not Mao Zedong, who is the orchestrator and executer of these all-encompassing changes to Chinese society. For others, while it may

⁸ Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard," 7.

⁹ Kelly Hammond, Rian Thum, and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "China's Bad Old Days Are Back," *Foreign Affairs*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-30/chinas-bad-old-days-are-back>.

not be business as usual in the CCP, the political changes taking place in the CCP do not represent a complete reversion to the Mao era.¹⁰ Xi lacks Mao's revolutionary credentials, and he is nowhere near as publicly venerated as Mao was. And while Xi has abolished term limits for the PRC presidency, this can easily be seen as a sign that Xi values the law within the PRC enough to actually change it rather than ignore it outright.¹¹ Still, even if the changes to the Chinese political system are not as extensive as some might suggest, the question of how was Xi able to push through the abolition of presidential term limits in conjunction with his decision not to appoint a successor to his position as General Secretary of the CCP remains a fascinating topic worthy of study.

There are three important elements within the existing literature that bear directly on this important question. The first concerns the move from the politics of the Mao era to the politics of collective leadership. A thorough understanding of what collective leadership is and how it came to be is important to fully grasp the significance of the changes Xi has made in Chinese politics because the move to collective leadership was such a significant trend within Chinese political culture. The second concerns the current extent of the move from collective leadership to the politics of the Xi era. Just as the move to collective leadership exhibited outward, observable signs, so too has the move to centralization. An analysis of these markers is important in deciphering just how significant and extensive that move to centralization actually is. Finally, the third debate concerns the question at hand—how Xi able was to enact significant changes within the Chinese political system. The literature suggests at least three avenues Xi used to consolidate his power: the elevation of his allies and faction members to positions of power in the CCP, his ability to capitalize on feelings of frustration within the CCP, and an environment of widespread repression initiated by his anti-corruption and ideological campaigns. All will be discussed in sequence below.

¹⁰ Alice Lyman Miller, "The Eighteenth Central Committee Leadership With Comrade Xi Jinping As General Secretary," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 48 (September 9, 2015), <https://www.hoover.org/research/Eighteenth-central-committee-leadership-comrade-xi-jinping-general-secretary>, 4-8.

¹¹ Taisu Zhang, "Xi Won't Go," *ChinaFile*, February 25, 2018, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/xi-wont-go>.

1. Collective Leadership: What It Is and How It Came to Be

In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping and his allies began pushing to reform the Chinese political sphere and implement a set of rules and norms known as collective leadership. Collective leadership, best described by Cheng Li, the director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution, is ““a system with a division of responsibilities among individual leaders in an effort to prevent arbitrary decision-making by a single top leader.””¹² As one might expect, the system is defined by an effort to make decisions via the consensus of the top office holders. To that end, Deng and his successors implemented many reforms to make this possible, including term limits for government office holders, unofficial retirement ages for communist officials, and a restructuring of the CCP itself.¹³ At the center of all the reforms is the idea that the communist party should not be allowed to atrophy and die, and that one of the central mechanisms to achieving this is the regular rotation and retirement of communist and government officials and their replacement by a well-trained group of younger cadres.¹⁴

Whether one views collective leadership as having been fully institutionalized or as a work in progress, the system and the movement toward it was certainly the dominant trend before Xi rose to power. The country had experienced regular successful transfers of power numerous times since Deng Xiaoping officially removed himself from the realm of politics. This trend was not specific to the presidency or the other top offices in the PRC, the General Secretary of the Communist Party and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the three of which formed the leadership trifecta. Power transfer in similarly important bodies—the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) to be specific—had also begun occurring peacefully and on a regular basis beginning with the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982.¹⁵ Additionally, power was shared between these many different bodies. While there was no question that the man

¹² Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*. 13.

¹³ Baum, “The Politics of China,” 342-345.

¹⁴ David L. Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008) Table 4.1.

¹⁵ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, Figure 3.1.

who held the three top offices was the official leader of the party and the government, that leader was considered to be the “first among equals,” a part of the leadership that collectively governed the country.¹⁶ This state of affairs gave rise to the idea among some that, after years of uncertainty concerning political power and its transfer, the CCP and the PRC had successfully consolidated the institutions surrounding the transfer of power.¹⁷

The significance of this move toward collective leadership lies in the fact that this was not always in the case in China, and this process has generally been difficult for any countries with authoritarian governments. For the party’s first few decades of existence, ultimate political power undoubtedly resided with Mao Zedong, and as such, the transfer of power occurred only by death (or disability) or by purge.¹⁸ Mao’s death in 1976 ended his reign and soon began that of Deng Xiaoping, who, like Mao, was the leading figure in Chinese politics (albeit not the top office holder) until his death in 1997. Like Mao, Deng held ultimate decision-making authority despite his lack of a formal office. However, unlike Mao, Deng used his authority to institutionalize politics within the PRC primarily by reforming the leadership structure and methods of political competition within the CCP.

Deng his allies in the reform of the PRC’s political and economic systems were motivated by two distinct but complimentary impulses—to avoid the worst of the preceding, Maoist era and to avoid the fate befalling other Communist regimes at the time. First, Deng appears to have been reacting to disastrous results from the previous, Maoist era, when the extreme concentration of power in the hands of Mao had allowed him to initiate destructive policies and purges like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹ Mao’s death in 1976 had ended this monopoly on power and allowed Deng (who had himself been purged from the leadership) to return and bring about much needed reforms to society. Second, Deng’s push for reform was only furthered by the domestic and international events that began in 1989 and continued well into the early 1990s. In

¹⁶ Li, 8.

¹⁷ Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard,” 7.

¹⁸ Baum, “The Politics of China,” 343.

¹⁹ Baum, 339.

chronological order, the CCP was shaken to its core first by the Tiananmen Square uprisings, followed by the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and finally the collapse of the world's leading communist government, the Soviet Union.²⁰ In a scramble to figure out exactly what had gone so wrong and how they could avoid such a fate, the CCP embarked on an extensive postmortem of the fallen regimes, concluding that one of the main causes of their downfall was the structure of the ruling party.²¹ Many Chinese analysts cite several of the same factors that pushed Deng to begin reforms in the first place, including an overconcentration of political power in one top leader and the lack of an institutionalized method for replacing top leaders.²²

As mentioned above, the extent of the institutionalization of this system of collective leadership is up for debate, and the answer to this question is crucial in understanding how Xi managed to centralize power. If the institutionalization was not fully complete or had never really begun in the first place, Xi's efforts to centralize power would have been much easier than if the system had been fully institutionalized. Li and others argue that the system of collective leadership was more or less successfully institutionalized by Deng and others and is operating as it should be. The evidence of several successful transitions of power at all levels of the Chinese government and the CCP since the early 1990s points supports this conclusion. The CCP Central Committee experienced an average turnover rate of roughly sixty percent between the Twelfth and the Sixteenth Party Congresses.²³ Crucially, the fact that political leaders, especially those in the top offices, have been able to serve out their full terms and retire for the past several decades with few exceptions is indicative of the fact that the system of collective leadership has been institutionalized in the PRC.²⁴ In addition to this, the structure of the CCP and the government of the PRC themselves reflect the collective nature of the decision-making

²⁰ Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party*, 2.

²¹ Shambaugh, 2.

²² Shambaugh, Table 4.1.

²³ Shambaugh. Table 7.1

²⁴ Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard," 8-9.

process. The important issues affecting the country are delegated to committees, not individuals, which, nominally, make decisions on these issues via consensus.

Alternatively, others argue that the system of collective leadership was never successfully institutionalized because Deng used his personalistic power to build the system. As Richard Baum, the former director of the UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, writes, “In his quest out lead China out of the ‘feudal autocracy’ of the Maoist era toward modernity and rule by law, Deng increasingly resorted to highly personalized instruments of control—instruments that were the very antithesis of the system he sought to create.”²⁵ As such, Deng was never able to fully implement the system he worked so hard to establish as it relied too much on him. During the Thirteenth Party Congress, the PSC even stipulated that Deng, who resigned his offices during that same Congress, was to be consulted on all important political matters.²⁶ Indeed, it was Deng who selected Jiang Zemin as his successor and it was Deng who designated Jiang’s successor, Hu Jintao, by elevating him, at a relatively young age, to the PSC.²⁷

2. Xi Jinping and His Consolidation of Power

Whether Xi represents a new trend or simply the next step in an old one, he, unlike his predecessors, has moved to consolidate power in the CCP. His efforts have been twofold. First, Xi has moved power back to the center of the CCP, shifting decision-making from local authorities to Beijing, while simultaneously strengthening the CCP vis-à-vis the rest of Chinese population by attempting to make the party the center of economic, social, and political life inside the PRC. Second, Xi has attempted to install himself at the center of the party, investing more and more of authority he has drawn into the CCP in himself. These two simultaneous efforts to centralize power have taken three dominant forms: institutional change, ideological reform, and anticorruption efforts.

²⁵ Baum, “The Politics of China.” 399.

²⁶ Baum, 406.

²⁷ Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard,” 8.

With respect to institutional change, Xi has instituted a number of reforms across the political-military in order to centralize power in the CCP and center the CCP on himself. According Alice Miller, researcher and visiting fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, attendees of the Third Plenum of the 19th Party Congress (February 2018) and the following NPC (March 2018) mandated the most extensive scope and depth of institutional reforms “in the entire post-Mao era.”²⁸ More than sixty in all and covering the entire political spectrum, these reforms, as stated in document that set them forth, the “Plan of Deepening Reform of Party Institutions,” are meant to “preserve the authority and centralized and unified leadership of the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core.”²⁹ With the broader movement of the centralization of all power in the CCP, Xi has begun systemically centralizing the CCP on himself, systematically taking control of the most important leading committees and government commissions and simultaneously demanded loyalty pledges from the military officers and party leaders.³⁰ Most telling off all, Xi broke with twenty-five years of tradition at the Nineteenth Party Congress and did not name a successor for his position as General Secretary of the CCP, a move which, taken in conjunction with the NPC’s decision to eliminate term limits, paves the way for Xi to retain two of the three most powerful offices he holds well past the traditional ten-year mark.³¹

Xi’s consolidation of power has not been limited to institutional reform but has even extended into the ideological arena. Since he first took office in 2012, Xi has embarked on a campaign to strengthen the ideology of the CCP by removing elements that may subvert its authority, a trend which in and of itself sets him apart from his predecessors.³² For example, Xi has implemented a crackdown on higher education in the PRC, demanding stronger party control over universities and less emphasis on “Western-

²⁸ Miller, “Only Socialism Can Save China; Only Xi Jinping Can Save Socialism,” 5-6.

²⁹ Miller. 6.

³⁰ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 26.

³¹ Economy, 10-12.

³² Suisheng Zhao, “Xi Jinping’s Maoist Revival,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 83–97.

inspired, liberal ideals.”³³ A large part of the broader ideological crackdown has been the Chinese government’s efforts to regulate the internet. The government, at Xi’s behest, has attempted to make the internet reflect values and thoughts the party deems fit; in other words, the government is attempting make the virtual world reflect the political one.³⁴ While the CCP has worked to strengthen its ideological hold, Xi has simultaneously centered that ideology on himself. Xi has adopted the symbols of power, adopting the title of “core” leader and having his theoretical work—“Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”—enshrined in the Party Constitution in a manner previously reserved only for Mao Zedong.³⁵

Finally, no description of Xi’s consolidation of power would be complete without the examination of Xi’s massive anticorruption campaign. Since Xi’s earliest days as a CCP official, he had been focused on combatting corruption, making it a hallmark of his political career and one of the first initiative he began upon ascending to the PRC’s top posts.³⁶ Anticorruption campaigns are not abnormal in the PRC, but, by many accounts, Xi’s is different in both duration and scope. The campaign has lasted well beyond the one- or two-year lifespans of its predecessors and it employs more than 800,000 officials committed to stamping out corruption.³⁷ And it has been highly effective; more than a million party officials have been disciplined in some many, a proportion of which have been prosecuted and convicted of graft.³⁸ Whether or not the campaign itself is true attempt to clean up the CCP, a masked effort by Xi to purge his political enemies, or both remains a point of debate, but there is no doubt that the anticorruption campaign has paralyzed local officials, thereby returning power to the CCP’s center and by extension Xi himself.

³³ Zhao, 83-97.

³⁴ Economy, *The Third Revolution*. 58.

³⁵ Economy. 18.

³⁶ Economy, 29-32.

³⁷ Economy, 29-32.

³⁸ Economy, 29-32.

3. How Did Xi Do It?

The extent to which Xi has consolidated power is impressive, but it inevitably raises the question of how he was able to move away from collective leadership and to the centralization of power in the first place. Like all complicated puzzles, there is no single answer. Xi seems to have pursued several different avenues to reach his goal of consolidating power within the party and within himself. However, broadly speaking, the literature suggests that Xi seems to have taken three different pathways to consolidate power in the Chinese political system: the elevation of members of Xi's faction to positions of power, Xi's ability to capitalize on feelings of frustration within the CCP, and widespread repression via Xi's anti-corruption and ideological campaigns.

According to those who subscribe to the first argument, there are currently two major factions within Chinese politics, the Jiang-Xi camp (so named for its main leaders Jiang Zemin and Xi Jinping) and the Hu-Li camp (named for its main leaders Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang).³⁹ The former is increasingly made up of “princelings”—party officials who come from the families of revolutionaries or other high-ranking officials—while the latter is mostly composed of officials who got their start in the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) and lack any revolutionary pedigree.⁴⁰ During the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012, the Jiang-Xi camp was able to secure six of the seven spots on the Eighteenth PSC, leaving the Hu-Li camp with Li Keqiang as its sole representative.⁴¹

The fact that Xi and his allies controlled the country's most powerful decision-making body would have certainly help Xi consolidate power during his first term, if that is indeed what is happening. However, according to Cheng Li, because Xi and his allies control the PSC this seeming consolidation of power could simply be a model of collective leadership that has come under the control of one faction—the Jiang-Xi faction.⁴² Xi's seemingly iron grip on power is more a product of the fact that Xi and, crucially, his

³⁹ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 19.

⁴⁰ Li, 8.

⁴¹ Li, 19.

⁴² Li, 19.

political allies hold six of the seven spots on the country's most important deliberative body, the PSC, as opposed to the consolidation of power in Xi himself.⁴³ Additionally, it must be noted that the make-up of the Eighteenth PSC was predominantly conservative, meaning that its members would have been open to the leadership consolidation that Xi has been carrying out.⁴⁴ It is certainly plausible that the friendly make-up of the Eighteenth PSC certainly helped pave the way for the Xi's power consolidation.

If the structure of the factional system of Chinese politics applies, it seems Xi may have used his political instincts to capitalize on several well-publicized incidents that strengthened his hand and that of his faction and weakened that of his opponents'. The first incident was the fall of Bo Xilai—the Chongqing Party Secretary—who was widely seen as one of Xi's main competitors for leadership.⁴⁵ Xi helped ensure his downfall, but in doing so tarnished his faction's reputation.⁴⁶ Salvation came in a second incident in which the son of CCYL leader Ling Jihua crashed a one million RMB Ferrari in Beijing.⁴⁷ The incident opened the CCYL faction up to attacks concerning the opulent lifestyle of its members and significantly tarnished of the power then-President Hu Jintao was to have over the Eighteenth Party Congress.⁴⁸ To further his agenda, Xi may have manufactured a third incident by disappearing for two weeks before the Eighteenth Party Congress, perhaps forcing Hu to make several concessions, the most significant of which was his decision to retire from all three of the main leadership positions instead of remaining as Chairman of the CMC.⁴⁹ Throughout all these incidents, Xi seems to have demonstrated his political prowess, and instinct that not only helped him construct a friendly Eighteenth PSC, but undoubtedly helped him in his efforts to consolidate power later on.

⁴³ Li, 33.

⁴⁴ Brad Carson, "Will Xi's Third Revolution Last?," Jaw-Jaw, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/11/jaw-jaw-will-xis-third-revolution-last/>.

⁴⁵ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping: Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression ?* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴⁶ Lam, 5-8.

⁴⁷ Lam, 5-8.

⁴⁸ Lam, 5-8.

⁴⁹ Lam, 5-8.

That being said, the decision to eliminate term limits for the Chinese presidency and not to name a successor for the position of General Secretary certainly require a reconsideration of the argument concerning factional politics, especially considering that Xi's moves seem to be an attempt to reinstitute the type of system that collective leadership was meant to replace. Ultimately, no matter the factional affiliation of members of the PSC and the Politburo as a whole, the sitting members of the important party and government bodies would have had to have been open to the leadership consolidation that Xi has been carrying out.⁵⁰ According to Alice Miller, this shift indeed existed and came about as a result of the reform stagnation that occurred under Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao. According to this view, Xi's attempts to centralize power have largely been supported by a party that seeks to push through important political-economic reform. According to this view, Xi is not acting by himself or with a faction; he is acting according to what the party wants, reflecting what is perhaps a more robust system of collective leadership than others have argued.

Xi's ability to consolidate power was certainly only furthered by the campaigns he initiated while in office, namely his anticorruption campaign and his ideological campaign. While the anticorruption campaign certainly seems to have had the desired effect, there is evidence that it has also been a weapon for Xi to use to neutralize his political enemies. As Elizabeth Economy, the C.V. Starr Senior Fellow and Director of Asian Studies at the Council of Foreign Relations, writes, "During December 2012 through 2014, more than twenty of the forty-four officials at the vice-ministerial level or higher whom the CCDI had removed had close ties or financial connection with Zhou Yongkang, considering one of Xi's most formidable political adversaries."⁵¹ She presents further evidence of the campaign's political bent by observing that few officials from the provinces where Xi spent his early political career—Zhejiang and Fujian—have been targeted for corruption, nor have the firms in which top officials attended the same universities as national leaders.⁵² In much the same way, Xi's ideological campaign seems to have had an effect on Xi's opposition. While the campaign to strengthen the ideology of CCP has certainly seemed to

⁵⁰ Carson, "Will Xi's Third Revolution Last?"

⁵¹ Economy, *The Third Revolution*. 34.

⁵² Economy, 32-35.

have done just that, it has also served to silence many of the party's critics and, by extensions, critics of Xi himself.⁵³

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS

In the literature concerning Xi's centralization of political power, two potential explanations stand out. First, it seems likely the internal dissatisfaction of CCP party members played a significant role in convincing the party to unite behind Xi and his political changes. Second, the sheer length and scope of Xi's anti-corruption campaign suggests that it is serving a purpose other than to simple rooting out of corruption. While there may be other significant explanations in the literature, this thesis will focus on evaluating these two because of how they interrelate. Xi may not have been able to even embark on the anti-corruption campaign without first firmly establishing party support. Therefore, each hypothesis has the potential to tell a similar story, that of a party that wanted to change the political system and a leader who, once in office with a mandate to do so, developed a tool to do it. The narrative surrounding these explanations is elaborated upon below.

1. Purge by another Name

Corruption within the ranks of the CCP and PRC officials is a well-documented, systemic problem. As such, Chinese leaders have a long history of pursuing corruption, but Xi's anticorruption campaign is exceptional for both its scope and its length.⁵⁴ At the same time, certain trends in the anticorruption campaign suggest that it may be something more. Whether it is the fact that the provinces in which Xi worked before he took the top job have experienced less corruption cases than others or the fact that many of Xi's biggest perceived rivals have been brought down on corruption charges, Xi's campaign appears to have turned into a selective purge. Using his personal credentials (Xi has a long history of pursuing anticorruption efforts) and the Chinese public's very real frustration with corruption, Xi is in the process of eliminating opposition to his political program, targeting

⁵³ Economy, 32-35.

⁵⁴ "Visualizing China's Anti-Corruption Campaign," ChinaFile, August 15, 2018, <http://www.chinafile.com/infographics/visualizing-chinas-anti-corruption-campaign>.

those who would presently stand against him. In addition to ending the political careers of his rivals, Xi's campaign has also silenced would-be critics and prevented any official from rising up to challenge Xi. Essentially, Xi's anticorruption campaign is simply a purge by another name, one that both silences and removes political enemies.

2. Internal Dissatisfaction

While Xi's anticorruption campaign would certainly help him consolidate power once in office, it does little to explain how he amassed the requisite power to embark on such a sweeping campaign in the first place. The answer to that puzzle can likely be found in the CCP members' dissatisfaction with several years of collective leadership under Xi's predecessor, President Hu Jintao. Under Hu, the central government became relatively ineffective at pursuing various policies across the economic and political spectrum due to tensions between the central and local governments and the limited individual accountability that some believe defines the system of collective leadership.⁵⁵ Indeed, Li quotes an oft-used phrase of the Hu era to make this point—"policies decided at Zhongnanhai [do not make] it out of Zhongnanhai."⁵⁶ With such dissatisfaction within the party, party leaders would have been open, even encouraging, of Xi's political program and may have even helped him pursue it by installing his allies in the PSC to streamline his process of power consolidation. Therefore, at least initially, internal dissatisfaction with the system of collective leadership under Hu would have allowed Xi to consolidate power in an effort to reestablish a strong central government capable of pursuing a daunting set of policies and reforms.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

These two different explanations will be evaluated against the available evidence to determine which factor or combination of factors seems most likely to explain how Xi was able to quickly and successfully consolidate power. For each hypothesis listed above,

⁵⁵ Cheng Li, "Think National, Blame Local: Central-Provincial Dynamics in the Hu Era," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 17 (January 30, 2006), <https://www.hoover.org/research/think-national-blame-local-central-provincial-dynamics-hu-era>.

⁵⁶ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 24-26.

a standard of evidence will be set to determine whether the hypothesis is valid. This standard will be based on two limiting factors: the evidentiary challenges associated with the question and the contemporary nature of the question itself. Given that the CCP is notoriously secretive about its inner workings, the evidence available to prove or disprove these hypotheses is naturally limited. Therefore, the evidence examined will primarily consist of the outward signs of the inner workings of the CCP and the best, educated guesses from other authors on the subject. Similarly, the contemporary nature of the question limits the amount of work and analysis that has already been done on the subject. Taken together, these challenges seem daunting, but that should not prevent a thorough examination of the question at hand. The explanation of how Xi consolidated power may prove useful in determining the success of any number of policies in other areas and, most importantly, the success of the CCP itself. Therefore, the answer to the question of how Xi consolidated power in the CCP and the PRC will be an educated conjecture that takes into account the full body of evidence available, but a conjecture that is in any case worth making.

In order to define the scope of the research and keep the research related to the question, the evidentiary standard for each of the hypotheses mentioned above will be defined here. With respect to Xi's anticorruption efforts, two main pieces of evidence must be found in order to prove that Xi's anticorruption campaign is actually a selective purge. The first important body of evidence consists of indications that the purge is indeed targeting Xi's political enemies or those who may challenge him in the future. Such targets may include officials with no personal loyalty to Xi, officials who have criticized Xi, officials who have enough backing to challenge Xi, or officials from other political factions. The second body of evidence will consist of indications that the anticorruption campaign is distinct from past campaigns, whether that distinction be in its scope, length, or content. Taken together, these different bodies of evidence will support the hypothesis that Xi's anticorruption campaign is actually a selective purge.

The analysis of the hypothesis that internal dissatisfaction with collective leadership under Hu Jintao paved the way for Xi's consolidation of power (at least initially) must naturally begin by establishing the potential causes of the initial dissatisfaction. In

order to establish a basis for these grievances, evidence of stalled reform, ineffective policy execution, and weak leadership must be produced. After establishing that there was a legitimate basis for these grievances, the next step is to analyze how the members of the CCP acted on these grievances. In order to confirm this hypothesis, the evidence must demonstrate that there was little resistance to Xi's changes, or that his changes were even welcomed, encouraged, and aided by upper echelons of the CCP. Such evidence could take the form of indications that the party acquiesced to Xi's requests at the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Party Congresses or that the party picked Xi because he indicated he would pursue a centralization of political power.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis will be organized around the two hypotheses presented here given the emphasis on methodically testing several different hypotheses against the available body of evidence. This introductory section has already established the theoretical underpinnings and significance of the question of how Xi was able to bring about changes in the Chinese political system. Chapter II will expand on this analysis, seeking to tell the story of the evolution of Chinese politics through an institution lens and providing detailed evidence that Xi political changes are actually a break with the past. Chapter III will evaluate the evidence concerning the CCP's support for Xi's political changes. That discussion will rely heavily on evidence from Hu Jintao's, Xi's predecessor, time in office in order to test if the Chinese leadership were actually dissatisfied with Hu's ability to implement reform. Chapter IV will evaluate if Xi's infamous anti-corruption campaign is functioning as a political purge. In order to do so, quantitative and qualitative analysis will be combined to first contextualize Xi's campaign in the history of anti-corruption efforts in the Reform Era and, second, analyze Xi's campaign on its own merit. Finally, the thesis will conclude with an evaluation of how Xi was able to consolidate power in the PRC and how that power consolidation may affect the future of the CCP and the PRC.

II. FROM CENTRALIZATION TO COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND BACK AGAIN: THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE POLITICS

A. INTRODUCTION: A CYCLE OF POLITICS

Chinese politics in the era of the PRC and the CCP is best pictured as a pendulum swinging between two poles of political liberalization and political tightening. When the pendulum swings toward political liberalization, efforts to open up the political space come to the fore. When the pendulum swings toward political tightening, the state's and party's efforts become more repressive and controlling. The Chinese themselves have a term for this—the fang-shou cycle—and this cycle has defined Chinese politics since the PRC's founding in 1949.⁵⁷ While the fang-shou cycle primarily refers to the alternating periods of loosening and tightening political control, there is another, broad cycle through which Chinese politics passes—the alternating periods of personal and institutional politics.

Personal politics, as the term implies, can be defined as politics based on a person or set of people to whom proximity determines political power. The Maoist era, lasting from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, can best be defined as an era of personal politics. Institutional politics, on the other hand, can be defined as politics in which rules and norms both determine who the dominant political players are and how those players' can exercise their political power. The era immediately succeeding the Maoist era, from roughly 1976 to 2012, can best be defined as an era of institutional politics in which rules and norms regarding political processes were developed and gradually obeyed. This era can be termed the era of collective leadership, taking its name from the institution that defined the politics of the time.

The current era, from 2012 to the present, is marked by a change in the political pendulum, a swing away from some of the rules and norms that have defined collective leadership. Whether that change will mark a full-scale return to personal politics on the level of the Maoist era remains to be seen, but the swing of the Chinese political pendulum has certainly reversed direction. At the very least, the Xi era, named after the current

⁵⁷ Shambaugh, *China's Future*, 98.

president of the PRC Xi Jinping, has seen a retreat from some long-held norms and the changing of some long-adhered-to rules. President Xi had actively worked to maneuver himself into a position of power few of his predecessors have achieved in the past. Most obviously, he has enshrined his legacy in the CCP's Constitution and paved the way for himself to rule for life if he so desires. However, more clandestinely, he has used the institutions of collective leadership to serve his own political purposes, taking over unprecedented numbers of small leading groups and utilizing norm-determined retirement ages to both remove challengers from power and keep others from arising. He has used the powers of the state and party to strengthen his leadership position, passing sweeping military and societal reforms while using the party's vast propaganda apparatus to build his own cult of personality. Ultimately, the Xi era is best seen as an era of personal politics, albeit a transitional one, in which President Xi Jinping is coopting or overturning established rules and norms in order to center the political power in the PRC on him.

The following will demonstrate that the Xi era is indeed a shift away from the institutional politics that defined the previous era. The first section will review the politics of the Maoist era followed by a second section that will discuss the transition from that era to the era of collective leadership. The third section will review the first era of collective leadership, from 1976 to 1989, and define exactly what the institution of collective leadership is. A fourth and fifth section review the CCP's decision to double down on the institution of collective leadership and exactly how that effort bore fruit between 1989 and 2012. Finally, the sixth section will argue that the current era is indeed distinguished from the previous one, although not exactly analogous to the Maoist era. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of the questions that inevitably stem from this discussion, specifically exactly how Xi has been able to implement these reforms in the first place.

B. THE MAOIST ERA: 1949 TO 1976

From the founding of the country on October 1, 1949 until September 9, 1976, the politics and governance of the PRC revolved around a single man—Mao Zedong. Mao's rule in the affairs of the CCP and the PRC was unquestionable. He was the ultimate arbiter in all decisions regarding the state, party, and military domains. Even those who disagreed

with him followed his word to the letter, which in many cases led to disastrous consequences for both themselves and the country as a whole. Mao's power during this period was not initially obvious to the casual observer; the CCP and the PRC were able to institute some rules of governance and open up the political atmosphere to facilitate the goal of collective leadership. Yet this was all done with Mao's blessing. When Mao decided to change course, the façade of collective leadership collapsed in a series of rapid, sometimes violent domestic and political changes. Ultimately, the Maoist era of Chinese politics can be largely characterized as personal politics, as power within the system depended on the proximity one had to Mao given that there were few if any institutions in existence to check the chairman's power.

The Maoist era began with relative political peace for two reasons: Mao's previously established authority in the CCP (and therefore the country as a whole) and, therefore, his decision not to contest to CCP's efforts to institutionalize collective leadership. Beginning almost with the founding of the CCP itself, Mao had slowly been building up personal power. His leadership in the CCP, from its founding and darkest days during the Long March to the wars against both the Japanese and the Kuomintang, had established a personality cult around Mao, such that he had become known as the liberator of China. This appeal began translating into structural measures designed to reinforce Mao's power. In 1943, Mao was given authority to make unilateral decision for the party in certain policy areas.⁵⁸ The "Thought of Mao Zedong" was eventually enshrined in the CCP's constitution two years later, in 1945.⁵⁹ Despite vast personal power, Mao actively took steps to institute at least the visage of collective leadership. During the Eighth Party Congress in 1956, the first since 1945, the CCP attempted to institute rules of succession and was able to facilitate an open discussion between various party members concerning the future of the party and the PRC.⁶⁰ The party even decided to reverse the decision they had made eleven years earlier and remove "Thought of Mao Zedong" from the party

⁵⁸ Frederick Teiwes, "The Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime, 1949-1957," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6–86.

⁵⁹ Teiwes, 6–86.

⁶⁰ Teiwes, 6–86.

constitution.⁶¹ Yet, as with all things during this era, these decisions had already received Mao's blessing; he acquiesced to the change in the constitution to calm Soviet fears of his developing personality cult and, while the dialogue at the Congress was open, it was between leaders of whom Mao had already approved.⁶²

Mao's leadership in the party eventually translated into leadership of the country. On October 1, 1949, it was Mao who announced the establishment of the PRC, anointing himself the ruler and personally appointing members of the CCP to positions within the government.⁶³ In the beginning, Mao's power was not immediately obvious as all major leaders within the party and the government seemed to be aligned on the goals of the state. In September of 1954, the country's leaders even ratified a new constitution that delegated substantial powers to the government and reflected the focus of the party on the Sovietization of the country.⁶⁴ Yet even in that early era when all seemed peaceful, Mao's position as arbiter of CCP and PRC policy shone through. In the lead up to the PRC's entry into the Korean War, the majority of the members of the CCP's Politburo were against intervention in the conflict.⁶⁵ However, Mao himself had come to the conclusion that the PRC would have to get involved to both demonstrate its commitment to the communist cause and its commitment to fighting its enemies, and so the PRC entered the war in November of 1950.⁶⁶ Decisions like this, including Mao's decision to speed up agricultural cooperativization in 1955, demonstrated Mao's power in the political system and simultaneously strengthened it on the virtue of his decisions' success.

While Mao's early decisions seem to have simply followed the larger thinking of the CCP or, when he decided against the majority, were ultimately successful, his decisions

⁶¹ Teiwes, 6–86.

⁶² Teiwes, 6–86.

⁶³ Zedong Mao, "Proclamation of the Central People's Government," Selected Works of Mao Zedong, October 1, 1949, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-7/mswv7_003.htm.

⁶⁴ Teiwes, "The Politics of China," 6–86.

⁶⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 296.

⁶⁶ Westad, 296-297.

beginning in the late 1950s became increasingly questionable if not outright wrong. The fact that he was still able to single-handedly guide the PRC to disaster in both the domestic and foreign policies realms without impediment demonstrates the extent to which Mao had personalized politics in China and had prevented the formation of any institutions that could check his power. Trouble began in 1958 when Mao, with the support of most of the party's other leaders, began pushing for an alternative to the previous Five-Year Plan in the form of the Great Leap Forward.⁶⁷ Initially, when the voices dissent began to call for a reversal of the policy to fix the many problems that had arisen, Mao deftly purged the dissenters from power.⁶⁸ However, as the magnitude of the disaster became more and more obvious, it was Mao himself who, briefly, became increasingly sidelined by other leaders.⁶⁹ However, Mao's brief fall from power only served to increase his paranoia about his own status and power, leading to even darker times for the CCP and PRC.

In the foreign policy realm, Mao began his plans to once again seize power by destroying the close Sino-Soviet relationship in order to pave the way for his domestic projects despite the fact that the country was still heavily reliant on Soviet expertise and material. He seized on the Soviet criticism of his Great Leap Forward as an excuse to drive the two countries apart, calling Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to Beijing to chastise him and his country for the paternalistic nature by which they supposedly treated the Chinese.⁷⁰ Soon, Mao was attacking the Soviet Union on all fronts, labeling the country an example of social-imperialism and claiming that it was the "bastion of reactionary forces in the world."⁷¹ Mao also leveraged the Sino-Soviet split to increase his power over domestic, Chinese politics. Those who disagreed with Mao's decision to split with the Soviets were labelled as "right-wing" and revisionist, and those who objected and remained

⁶⁷ Kenneth Lieberthal, "The Great Leap Forward and the Split in the Yan'an Leadership, 1958-1965," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 87-146.

⁶⁸ Lieberthal, 89.

⁶⁹ Lieberthal, 89.

⁷⁰ Westad, *Restless Empire*, 337.

⁷¹ Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 242.

silent but who Mao suspected of disagreeing with him were forced to become the face of the Chinese effort to split with the Soviet Union, as was the case with Deng Xiaoping.⁷²

Having effectively removed any foreign obstacles to his domestic intentions, Mao initiated the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution in 1966. This event, more than perhaps any preceding action, demonstrates to extent to which Mao controlled Chinese politics. A complete account of the movement is unnecessary here, the crucial point being that it was Mao who was single-handedly able to turn to the Chinese masses against the very party he had helped found and empower. He created the social forces of the movement and he supplied it with its ideology.⁷³ It was Mao from whom leaders of the movement drew their legitimacy.⁷⁴ So long as he was alive, even those who opposed the movement could ultimately do nothing to stop it. For ten years, the CCP and the PRC writhed in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, as both the country and the party lacked the institutions to check the power of the leader. By the time of Mao's death in 1976, the politics of the PRC finally reflected what had been known all along—Mao had reigned supreme, without checks, without balances, without equals, the epitome of personal politics.

C. FROM MAO TO COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Mao's death in 1976 provided an opening for CCP leaders to begin rebuilding the party and the state anew. Led by Deng Xiaoping, this process took place in two phases. The first phase occurred in the years immediately following Mao's death, from 1976 to 1989, a phase that saw the beginnings of collective leadership. The second phase, a doubling down on the movement toward collective leadership, lasted from 1989 until 2012 and occurred as a response to domestic unrest, namely the events surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests, and massive geopolitical changes, specifically the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Both these phases are distinguished

⁷² Westad, *Restless Empire*, 338.

⁷³ Harry Harding, "The Chinese State in Crisis, 1966-1969," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 147–245.

⁷⁴ Harding, 147–245.

by a push within the CCP to establish rules and norms to govern the politics of the party and the state in order to ensure the success and the survival of both.

Deng Xiaoping's rule over the PRC and the CCP began with the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December of 1978. That meeting saw the official start of economic reforms that would turn the PRC into the economic powerhouse it is today, but, more relevant for this discussion, the fall from power Deng's predecessor, Hua Guofeng, in all but his titular capacities. To do so, Deng shrewdly manipulated media coverage of Hua and his "Two Whatevers"—Hua's promise to "uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao had made and to unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave—to turn elite opinion against Hua.⁷⁵ His ability to manipulate the domestic political conversation, as well as the predisposition of many in the Chinese political elite to repudiate Mao after ten years of what was essentially ten years of civil war, allowed Deng to achieve great success. By 1981, Hua and his allies were had been stripped of all their party and state titles and relegated to the bottom of the Central Committee lists.⁷⁶

Having firmly secured power, Deng turned his sights from those who had attempted to further Mao's legacy to the legacy itself. Under Deng's leadership, the CCP began separating itself from Mao by staging trials for those involved in the Cultural Revolution between November of 1980 and January of 1981.⁷⁷ All four members of the "Gang of Four" were found guilty, with two being sentenced to death (later commuted to life in prison) and two being sentenced to terms in prison.⁷⁸ Attention then turned to the role Mao himself had played in the Cultural Revolution. After intense debate, the CCP adopted a resolution that placed the blame for the Cultural Revolution squarely on Mao's shoulders at the 6th Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1981, stating "The 'cultural revolution'

⁷⁵ Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism, 1969-1982," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 246–336.

⁷⁶ MacFarquhar, 246–336.

⁷⁷ MacFarquhar, 246–336.

⁷⁸ MacFarquhar, 246–336.

which lasted from May 1996 to October 1976 was responsible for the most severe setback and heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic. It was initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong.”⁷⁹ With Mao's legacy firmly dealt with, Deng began to implement actual rules and norms to guide the CCP forward.

D. COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: 1976 TO 1989

If the Eleventh Party Congress saw the repudiation of the past, the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982 saw the inklings of the future. As part of the move toward power-sharing, the party abolished the position of Party Chairman at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982 in order to ensure no one individual could try to emulate Mao by ascending to that position.⁸⁰ Additionally, the party moved to ban personality cults, stating “The Party proscribes all forms of personality cult. It shall be ensured that the activities of Party leaders are subject to oversight by the Party and the people, while at the same time upholding the standard of all leaders who represent the interests of the Party and the people.”⁸¹ Deng simultaneously worked to appoint and train potential successors by giving them official offices and responsibilities, thereby implementing an early succession program the likes of which Mao never instituted.⁸² Taken together, these institutional changes represented the first moves toward achieving what had long been dreamt of but never attained—collective leadership. Collective leadership—best described as “a system with a division of responsibilities among individual leaders in an effort to prevent arbitrary decision-making by a single top leader”—was not only Deng's answer to Mao's personal politics, but a long-dreamt-of goal of the CCP.⁸³ With Deng's ascension to leadership, collective

⁷⁹ “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China,” Chinese Communism Subject Archive, June 27, 1981, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>.

⁸⁰ MacFarquhar, “The Politics of China,” 246–336.

⁸¹ Chinese Communist Party, “Constitution of the Communist Party of China,” October 24, 2017, <http://www.china.org.cn/20171105-001.pdf>.

⁸² MacFarquhar, “The Politics of China,” 246–336.

⁸³ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 13.

leadership became a reality, an institution reinforced by several more actions on the part of the CCP.

One of the first of these new policies to be implemented was the norm of retiring older members of the Politburo. Under Mao, party officials only left their positions through purge or death.⁸⁴ Deng, knowing that such a situation could not continue and wanting clear positions for new members in the upper echelons of the party, decided to begin implementing a retirement system for older party cadre. Like many of Deng's economic reforms, he developed a temporary, transitional institution called the Central Advisory Committee (CAC), a body to which retiring, senior party members would enter after exiting office and maintain full salary and power over policy in an advisory capacity.⁸⁵ First implemented at the First Plenum of the Twelfth Party Congress, the CAC did little to facilitate the retiring of senior leaders in the Politburo (although the Central Committee as a whole did experience a turnover rate of sixty percent during that plenum).⁸⁶ However, the CAC would prove its worth as an institution during the Fourth Plenum, in which sixty-four members of the Central Committee stepped down, including one member of the PSC and nine other Politburo members, and again during the Fifth Plenum, in which six members of the Politburo stepped down, most of them to be replaced with individuals whose average age was fifty.⁸⁷

The norm of retirement upon a reaching a set age also facilitated the creation of another set of decision-making bodies—leading small groups. Leading small groups were not a new innovation to the Chinese political system, as several were established in June of 1958 to help with the day-to-day governing of the country.⁸⁸ However, like many early Chinese political institutions, they were abolished when Mao turned the country against the party during the Cultural Revolution. As part of his political reform package, Deng

⁸⁴ Baum, "The Politics of China," 343.

⁸⁵ Baum 342-343.

⁸⁶ Baum, 343.

⁸⁷ Baum, 376-378.

⁸⁸ Alice Lyman Miller, "The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," in *Critical Readings on the Chinese Communist Party*, ed. Kjeld Brodsgaard (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 279–303.

reestablished several leading small groups in the wake of the Fifth Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in February of 1980. The Finance and Economy Leading was established in 1980 at the Fifth Plenum, the Taiwan Affairs Leading group one month before in January of 1980, and the Foreign Affairs Leading Group a year later in 1981.⁸⁹ By the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987, two other leading small groups had been established and leadership of these groups was split between the PSC members.⁹⁰ In all, the diffusion of decision-making power to these groups, accompanied with the newer, better educated generation of leaders entering the ranks due to the norm of retirement ages, became one of the most telling signs of the institutionalization of collective leadership during this era.

Deng also facilitated the institution of intra-party democracy within the CCP. Again, a long-discussed reform during the Maoist era, intraparty democracy is the concept that positions and ranking within the party is determined by a vote of party membership. Like the norm of retiring upon reaching a certain age, intra-party democracy was also first instituted during the Twelfth Party Congress. Delegates to the Twelfth Party Congress members were permitted to add names to and eliminate names from a list of nominees for the Central Committee, albeit a list provided by party leadership.⁹¹ A fuller evolution of this institution was seen at the Thirteenth Party Congress in which CCP members voted for members of the Politburo in a competitive election in which the number of candidates was larger than the number of Politburo seats.⁹²

Finally, the CCP under Deng undertook several measures to redefine its relationship with the state apparatus. This occurred along two dimensions—legally and institutionally. In the legal sphere, the party took steps to subordinate itself to the laws of the state, writing into the party constitution that “the Party must conduct activities within the limits permitted by the Constitution and the laws of the state.”⁹³ Accordingly, the NPC

⁸⁹ Miller, 279–303.

⁹⁰ Miller, 279–303.

⁹¹ Lin Gang, “Leadership Transition, Intra-Party Democracy, and Institution Building in China,” in *Leadership in a Changing China: Leadership Change, Institution Building, and New Policy Orientations*, ed. Weixing Chen and Yang Zhong (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 37–55.

⁹² Gang, 37–55.

⁹³ MacFarquhar, “The Politics of China,” 335.

of 1982 passed a new constitution for the PRC that augmented its own power and explicitly spelled out its own responsibilities in making and implementing laws.⁹⁴ The new constitution also added new restrictions on leadership posts, specifically the implementation of term limits for government leaders and a prohibition against serving in more than one government leadership post concurrently.⁹⁵ Institutionally, the party, once again under the direction of Deng, began to attempt to distance itself from the government in order to better facilitate the economic reforms being undertaken.⁹⁶ Perhaps the most important legacy of this decision was the shifting of responsibility over economic matters from the party's Central Committee to the State Council, where the premier took the reins.⁹⁷

E. DOUBLING DOWN

The institutionalization of Chinese politics was accompanied by large changes in the economic and governance spheres as well. Taken together, these changes marked a massive shift away from the past and, perhaps predictably, led to correspondingly large social movements that threatened the rule of the CCP. These stirrings came to a head in April and June of 1989 when public demonstrations erupted across the country.⁹⁸ While the focal point of the movement was the large student protests in Tiananmen Square, the students represented only a small part of the protests. Urban workers (*shimin*) and students in cities across the country rose up in protest of the CCP's regime. In response, the CCP called in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to swiftly crush the dissenters in Beijing. In all, during the PLA's operation between June third and fourth, between 600 and 1,200 *shimin*, students, and soldiers died, with an additional 6,000 to 10,000 injured, but the dissenters were crushed in a stunning show of force that ensured CCP rule for the near future.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Baum, "The Politics of China," 347.

⁹⁵ Baum, 347.

⁹⁶ Gang, "Leadership Transition, Intra-Party Democracy, and Institution Building in China," 37–55.

⁹⁷ Baum, "The Politics of China," 337–467.

⁹⁸ Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party*, 42–45.

⁹⁹ Baum, "The Politics of China," 452–457.

The PRC and the CCP, however, proved to be the exception to this period. While the CCP successfully crushed domestic dissent to remain in power, its counterparts in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were not so lucky. On the same day the Chinese were clearing Beijing of protests (June 4, 1989), Polish voters peacefully ousted the communist regime in their country.¹⁰⁰ Other Eastern European communist governments followed, and the contagion spread such that, by 1991, the Soviet Union itself had disintegrated into fifteen different states. The simultaneous domestic and foreign shocks sparked an intense period of soul-searching within the PRC, a period of time during which the CCP sought to learn the lessons of their former allies and prepare the party to govern in a new world order.

Much of the Chinese, post-Tiananmen, post-Soviet analysis concluded that the Soviet Union and its client states had fallen largely due to the atrophy of their political systems, particularly the stagnation and disintegration of their respective communist parties. One of the first analysis to come in the wake of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe was a piece from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) published in 1990 that cited “dictatorships...ruling parties divorced from their populace and...the overcentralization of the party structure.”¹⁰¹ Later analysis in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union identified several more factors: “overconcentration of political power in top leader; personal dictatorship; failure to replace political leaders systematically; no inner-party democracy; special privileges [for the party]; poorly developed mechanism to police party members for breach of discipline.”¹⁰² In response, the Chinese began to double down on the institutionalization of their politics, beginning the second phase of the country’s period of institutional politics.

F. COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: 1989 TO 2012

The PRC and the CCP were lucky that the country had already embarked on institutional reforms before the crisis period of 1989 to 1991. As such, the regime simply had to see these reforms through to their fruition to prevent their regime from succumbing

¹⁰⁰ Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party*, 42-45.

¹⁰¹ Shambaugh, 50.

¹⁰² Shambaugh, Table 4.1.

to the same pressures that toppled communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Alas, this was easier said than done. The shocks of the fall of communism were able to reverse some reforms; Deng's push to separate the party from the government was all but abandoned for fear that such a division would eventually create a cleavage that could bring down the CCP.¹⁰³ However, the institutionalization of politics in many areas, including succession politics, norms concerning age limits, and the strengthening of party cadre and state bureaucrats, continued apace.

Perhaps the most important aspects of the continued institutionalization of Chinese politics were the success of leadership transitions at the highest levels of the Chinese government post-1989. Deng had attempted see two general secretaries through their full terms in office—Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang—but both were booted from office as a result of their inability to maintain social stability within the country.¹⁰⁴ In response, Deng tried again, selecting Jiang Zemin to be “the core of the third generation of leadership.” Jiang was named General Secretary during the Fourth Plenary Session of the Thirteenth Central Committee in June of 1989, appointed CMC chairman in September of that same year, and was appointed President of the PRC during the Eighth NPC in 1993.¹⁰⁵ Having been invested with the three highest office within in the PRC and the CCP, Jiang was prepared to succeed Deng. Following Deng's exit from political life in 1994 (and his eventually death in 1997), Jiang was able to reaffirm his position as core leader even without Deng's patronage.

The more significant transfer of power, however, occurred between Jiang Zemin and his successor, Hu Jintao. The Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002 saw the peaceful transfer of power from Jiang to Hu in the form of the office of General Secretary with the

¹⁰³ Gang, “Leadership Transition, Intra-Party Democracy, and Institution Building in China,” 37–55.

¹⁰⁴ Baum, “The Politics of China,” 406 and 452.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Fewsmith, “Reaction, Resurgence, and Succession: Chinese Politics since Tiananmen,” in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 468-527.

Presidency being transferred the following March at the Tenth NPC.¹⁰⁶ It is notable that Jiang did not transfer the CMC Chairmanship to Hu until 2004. However, this timing was in accordance with the staggered method by which Jiang himself received his state and party positions, and therefore it can be argued that such timing was actually in keeping with the norm of succession.¹⁰⁷ By 2012, the CCP and the PRC had successfully experienced two significant leadership successions. The transition of power between Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping that year made it three, lending credence to the idea that the politics of succession had been successfully institutionalized.

Successful changes in power did not only occur in the highest office. Indeed, the norm of retirement ages was beginning to have an even greater effect. The Fourteenth Party Congress saw the elimination of the CAC and a corresponding liberation of the younger, newer members of the Central Committee and the Politburo.¹⁰⁸ Party Congresses between 1982 and 2002 saw turnover rates in the Central Committee averaging around sixty percent.¹⁰⁹ High turnover also meant the emergence of a new generation of leaders, the third generation of leadership. The average age of Central Committee members had dropped from sixty-five at the Eleventh Party Congress in 1977 to fifty-five at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002.¹¹⁰ Additionally, the percentage of Central Committee members with a college degree had risen from twenty-five percent to ninety-eight percent during that same period.¹¹¹ Subsequent Party Congresses continued these trends, leading to both a better educated and younger ruling elite in the third and fourth generations of leadership.

The development of the party cadre allowed for a flourishing of leading small groups, especially under Hu Jintao. By the time of Hu's ascendance to the leading offices,

¹⁰⁶ Alice Lyman Miller, "Dilemmas of Globalization and Governance," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, 3rd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 528-599.

¹⁰⁷ Miller, 528-599.

¹⁰⁸ Fewsmith, "Chinese Politics since Tiananmen," 468-527.

¹⁰⁹ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, Chapter 3.

¹¹⁰ Li, Chapter 3.

¹¹¹ Li, Chapter 4.

the number of the primary leading groups had expanded from five to eight.¹¹² Similar to the pre-1989 collective leadership period, the leading small groups, were once again divided between members of the PSC, with Hu only ever controlling three of the eight leading small groups throughout his time in office.¹¹³ The membership lists of these groups also reflected the strengthening of norms surrounding the retirement age; shuffling of members of these small groups generally coincided with the ascendance of new members to the Central Committee during party congresses.¹¹⁴

Ultimately, by 2012, the CCP had arguably achieved many of the institutional reforms it had set out to achieve. Top party leaders had overseen several successful transitions of power. The composition of officers in both the party and the state was younger and more technically equipped to handle the challenges of the large, growing country. Leading small groups allowed power over policy to be distributed among top officials within the CCP and the PRC. Political power was, for all intents and purposes, held collectively and decisions were made accordingly.

G. THE XI ERA: FROM 2012 TO THE PRESENT DAY

The Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012 marked yet another turning point in the currents of Chinese politics. It was during this time that Hu Jintao's successor, Xi Jinping, assumed the positions of power. While Xi was initially viewed as a liberalizing reformer who planned to continue the institutionalization of Chinese politics, his rule has turned out to be very different. Xi's reign to date, has seen a crackdown on political and social freedoms and a recentralization of the party in the lives of everyday Chinese citizens and in the government of the PRC. More importantly though, Xi has begun to turn back some of the reforms that characterized the institutional politics of the earlier era. Such changes encompass the obvious—changes to term limits, party ideology, and personal power—but also the less apparent—military and personnel reforms. Taken together, these reforms

¹¹² Miller, "The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," 279-303.

¹¹³ Miller, 279-303.

¹¹⁴ Miller, 279-303.

represent a change from the previous era, although not necessarily a complete return to the personal politics of the Maoist era.

The most obvious sign of Xi's return to personal politics, indeed the one that has received the most attention over the last few years, was the abolition of presidential term limits in PRC's constitutions by the NPC in March of 2018.¹¹⁵ The significance of this move, however, is only fully understood in the context of another, more important move by Xi—his decision not to appoint a successor to the office of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China at the Nineteenth Party Congress in October of 2017—a decision that broke with the longstanding precedent that successors are designated five years before their ascendance to the role of party and state leader.¹¹⁶ Given that it is the party, not the state, that takes precedence in the PRC, Xi's decision to retain his party office is more significant than his decision to retain his state ones. In fact, the amendments to the PRC's constitution can be seen as the natural result of Xi's decision to retain his party offices, a move necessary to maintain the letter of the norm that leaders in the PRC and the CCP hold the party's and country's three most important offices (General Secretary, President, and Chairman of the CMC). However, the spirit of the norm—that the constitutional limits on presidential terms would also limit the time in other offices—has certainly been broken, and Xi has thereby signaled that he intends to rule for at least one more term (from 2022 to 2027) if not beyond.

Corresponding to the idea that it is the changes within the party, not the state, that matter more for the governance of the country, the party has also promoted Xi and advanced his agenda in several other ways. Beginning in the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012 and continuing in the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017, the CCP has consistently stacked the Politburo and the Politburo Central Committee with Xi's close, factional allies and shunned those who had the potential to challenge his rule. At the Eighteenth Party Congress, Xi and his allies secured six of the seven spots in the PSC, leaving only one

¹¹⁵ Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, "China's Legislature Blesses Xi's Indefinite Rule. It Was 2,958 to 2," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/11/world/asia/china-xi-constitution-term-limits.html>.

¹¹⁶ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 10-12.

member of the opposition, Premier Li Keqiang, in the nation's highest ruling body.¹¹⁷ The Nineteenth Party Congress saw even more success for Xi. Xi and his allies secured five of the six spots on the PSC as well as eighteen of twenty-spots on the Politburo as a whole.¹¹⁸ Outside of the Politburo, Xi was able to position several of his political allies in key positions across nearly all of China's thirty-one provinces, ensuring Xi's influence is able to spread outside of Zhongnanhai, a problem Chinese leaders have consistently encountered when trying to implement policies across the country.¹¹⁹ Xi's power to appoint his allies to prominent positions is not only confined to high level and regional posts. In all, Xi has been able to stack positions, opened because of the strong norms surrounding retirement age, at all levels of the government and the party with allies, ensuring a political coalition that will overpower those who oppose it for many years to come.

Many leading small groups, once a prominently symbol of collective leadership, have also come under Xi's sway. During Xi's first term, he led more leading small groups than Hu ever did during his terms (six of eleven versus four of ten by one count, six of eleven versus three of eight by another).¹²⁰ Additionally, Xi arguably controlled the most important groups in the current political moment, including a new group on "Comprehensive Deepening Reform," and, perhaps more significantly, the Finance and Economy leading small group, an area which had previously been reserved for the premier in his role as the steward of the Chinese economy.¹²¹ More recently, many of these small groups have been elevated to the level of commissions, including the groups on comprehensive deepening reform, cybersecurity, and foreign affairs, while the elevation of

¹¹⁷ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 19.

¹¹⁸ Minxin Pei, "China's Return to Strongman Rule," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-01/chinas-return-strongman-rule>.

¹¹⁹ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "The Xi Jinping Faction Dominates Regional Appointments After the 19th Party Congress," *China Brief* 18, no. 2 (February 13, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/xi-jinping-faction-dominates-regional-appointments-19th-party-congress/>.

¹²⁰ Miller, "The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups"; Alice Lyman Miller, "More Already on the Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 44 (July 28, 2014), <https://www.hoover.org/research/more-already-central-committees-leading-small-groups>. The counting presumably differs between these two sources because of the lack of transparency surrounding these leading small groups.

¹²¹ Miller, "More Already on the Central Committee's Leading Small Groups."

the group on finance and economy is in the process of doing so.¹²² Changing the status of these groups to committees would institutionalize their power over the government, and, as may be expected, Xi leads all four.¹²³

In addition to the many favorable personnel changes, the party has also moved to cement Xi's legacy and power in more symbolic ways. At the Sixth Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress in October of 2016, the CCP bestowed upon Xi the title of "core of the leadership."¹²⁴ To be fair, Jiang Zemin also obtained the title of "core," but Xi is certainly the first leader to do so himself (Jiang was given the title by Deng) and obtain the title without qualification (Jiang was referred to as "core of the third-generation leadership").¹²⁵ Additionally, the party, at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017, enshrined "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" into the party constitution.¹²⁶ The use of Xi's name is the most significant aspect of the change here; both Jiang and Hu had left their respective imprints on party ideology, but only Deng and Mao, in the form of "Mao Zedong Thought" and "Deng Xiaoping Theory," were actually named.¹²⁷ Indeed, while the official name of Xi Jinping's ideological contribution is strong and unwieldy, the state propaganda machine is already hard at work contracting the phrase to its logical derivative—"Xi Jinping Thought—with over 23 forms of "Xi Thought" appearing tens of thousands of times in publications across the PRC.¹²⁸ The personnel and ideological changes in the CCP, taken together, indicate a sweeping consolidation of party power in the hands of Xi Jinping.

¹²² Wendy Wu, "Shake-up in Chain of Command Looms as Xi's Leading Group on Economy Is Elevated," *South China Morning Post*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2138293/xi-jinpings-leading-group-economy-gets-more-heft>.

¹²³ Wu.

¹²⁴ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "Xi Jinping Uses New 'Leadership Core' Status to Boost His Faction," *China Brief* 16, no. 17 (November 11, 2016), <https://jamestown.org/program/xi-jinping-uses-new-leadership-core-status-boost-faction/>.

¹²⁵ Pei, "China's Return to Strongman Rule." ; Lam, "Xi Jinping Uses New 'Leadership Core' Status to Boost His Faction."

¹²⁶ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 23-24.

¹²⁷ Gang Qian, "China Discourse Report 2018," China Media Project, December 30, 2018, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/12/30/china-discourse-report-2018/>.

¹²⁸ Qian Gang.

Nor has Xi been content with simply convincing the political elite of China. Xi, unlike his predecessors, has also worked to build his own version of a cult of personality, leveraging the CCP's substantial control over domestic media to do the job. In the first year and a half of his first term, Xi was mentioned two times more in the first eight pages of the People's Daily and twenty percent more on the front page alone when compared to his two immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.¹²⁹ More recently, the People's Daily ran a full five-page piece to commemorate the anniversary of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee and the start of the reform period in which Xi was mentioned 127 times while Deng, the man who started the reform period, was mentioned sixty times, less than half as many as Xi.¹³⁰ State and party organizations are not the only ones building Xi's narrative; everyday Chinese citizens have also had a hand in it through Xi's constant promotion in Chinese social media. Songs, such as Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama, and poems, such as General Secretary, the sight of your back and the look of my eyes, are prolific on sanctioned social media platforms.¹³¹ Chinese netizens also latch on to Xi's carefully choreographed public appearances. Xi's visit to the Qingfeng Steamed Bun Shop in Beijing in 2013 garnered substantial social media attention, as did his visit to a popular Beijing shopping district later that year. And even if such interactions with ordinary citizens are commonplace in Chinese politics, the fact that the Qingfeng Steamed Bun Shop has since become a tourist attraction for ordinary Chinese citizens is a testament to Xi's hold over the Chinese psyche.¹³² Such the constant promotion of Xi has had an effect; local politicians' praises and pledges of fealty to Xi reached such alarming levels that party leadership has supposedly issued guidelines restricting certain phrases used to praise

¹²⁹ David Bandurski, "The Man Who Controls the Headlines," China Media Project, December 4, 2015, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2015/12/04/the-man-in-the-headlines/>.

¹³⁰ David Bandurski, "Xi Jinping's Story of Reform," China Media Project, December 18, 2018, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/12/18/putting-numbers-on-chinas-reform-legacy/>.

¹³¹ Liangen Yin and Terry Flew, "Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama: Digital Culture and the Return of Charismatic Authority in China," *Thesis Eleven* 144, no. 1 (February 2018): 80–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513618756098>.

¹³² Andrew Jacobs and Chris Buckley, "Move over Mao: Beloved 'Papa Xi' Awes China," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/world/move-over-mao-beloved-papa-xi-awes-china.html>.

Xi.¹³³ Although reminiscent of Mao's own personality cult, Xi's persona is clearly different, with his image being crafted to reflect that of an everyday man, whereas Mao was presented as above all others.¹³⁴ Therefore, while Xi certainly has popular appeal, he will likely never reach the power Mao had with the masses. Yet, Xi's own cult is certainly a break with his immediate predecessors, who guarded against any semblance of a cult of personality.

Xi's popularity with the public and his hold over the CCP has allowed him to push through a number of reforms in nearly all sectors of Chinese life, reforms aimed at centralizing the CCP in Chinese society, military, and government. By definition, given Xi push to centralize the party on himself, this means centralizing the Chinese society, military, and government on him. Many of the reforms focused on strengthening the party's role in society are focused on how the Chinese people receive and process information, specifically on the internet and on the educational system. Over the past decade, the PRC has built a censorship leviathan meant to control the domestic dialogue over the internet. While political censorship of the internet is nothing new, Xi's active role in that process is. He now chairs the Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group, a position previously reserved for the premier.¹³⁵ He has also reinvigorated the bureaucratic arms of the censorship leviathan, creating the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) out of the State Internet Information Agency and placing the administrative offices of his leading group within the CAC to ensure full control over both the policy and its execution.¹³⁶ Within the realm of education, the CCP, under the direction of Xi, has targeted a variety of institutions, from universities to think tanks, for teaching and propagating Western values, and has deployed new methods, from new textbooks to new political screening systems for

¹³³ Staff, "Cults, Cores and Crowns: CMP 2017 Discourse Report," China Media Project, January 8, 2018, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/01/08/cults-cores-and-crowns-cmp-releases-2017-discourse-report/>.

¹³⁴ Yin and Flew, "Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama."

¹³⁵ William Wan, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Takes Charge of New Cyber Effort," Washington Post, February 27, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/chinese-president-takes-charge-of-new-cyber-effort/2014/02/27/a4bffaac-9fc9-11e3-b8d8-94577ff66b28_story.html.

¹³⁶ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 23.

university positions, to strengthen the CCP ideological line.¹³⁷ On a whole, these reforms seem to have reached deep into the lives of Chinese citizens, demonstrating the CCP's new focus on asserting itself more prominently in life in China.

The military, too, has been a focus of Xi's reforms and the changes within the structure and workings of the PLA reflect the centrality of Xi to the reform package. In the first place, Xi's reforms of the PLA slimmed down the CMC from eleven to seven members, creating a smaller group at the top of the military chain of command, the smallest since the 1930s.¹³⁸ Arguably more significant than the number on the CMC is its composition with respect to both the people and the interests formally represented. At least two of the CMC members seem to have personal ties to Xi, and of the seven offices held by the new CMC members, two—the Political Work Department Director and the Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary—aim to ensure the military remains loyal to the CCP.¹³⁹

One other indication of Xi's increasing power over the military is his central role in how these reforms came about. In pushing these reforms through, Xi has emphasized his ultimate power over the PLA by highlighting the "CMC chairman responsibility system," which states that as the CMC Chairman, Xi is ultimately responsible for military matters.¹⁴⁰ The idea of the CMC chairman responsibility system was ultimately enshrined in the party constitution during the 19th party congress, ensuring its staying power for years to come.¹⁴¹ Additionally, Xi, unlike his immediate predecessor Hu, has been personally involved in the promotion and assignment process for senior officers, allowing him, if he so desires, to

¹³⁷ Economy, 37-42.

¹³⁸ Joel McFadden, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, "The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China's Military to His Vision," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), 557–82.

¹³⁹ McFadden, Fassler, and Godby, 557–82.

¹⁴⁰ Phillip C Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), 519-556.

¹⁴¹ McFadden, Fassler, and Godby, "The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China's Military to His Vision," 557–82.

promote those with personal loyalty to him.¹⁴² On the issue of loyalty, Xi has also taken to demanding loyalty pledges from senior PLA leaders.¹⁴³ Whether Xi's personal involvement in the process of reform of the PLA is by necessity (the reforms could not happen with his involvement) or by design (the reforms are designed to make Xi a central figure in military matters) is up for debate, but the fact remains that, as a result of his personal involvement, the entire structure of the PLA and success of the accompanying reforms now rely on him.

H. CONCLUSION: A CARROT AND A STICK

Clearly, Xi Jinping has embarked on massive sweeping reforms of the CCP, the PLA, the PRC, and the very structure of Chinese society. The very nature of these reforms has represented a change in direction, a crest in the pendulum's swing toward institutional politics and its new movement back toward personal politics. That being said, it is doubtful that Xi's reforms will return the PRC to the Maoist era, when one man ruled supreme. The fact that Xi amended the state constitution's limit on presidential terms rather than ignore it entirely represents the staying power of some of the lessons and reforms that have carried over from the previous era. But the sheer scale and depth of the reforms under Xi and their ultimate effect—the placement of Xi at the center of Chinese political life—, whether intentional or not, certainly represents the arrival of a new era of Chinese politics.

What remains to be seen is exactly how Xi was able to centralize the party on his own person and centralize Chinese society on the party. Changing the direction of the Chinese political sphere is no easy task, as the sheer size and depth of Chinese politics means that it develops a momentum all its own. As in all governments, bureaucrats fastidiously defend their entrenched interests while leaders, elected or not, do all they can to cling to power. As in all parties, ideology dictates the disposition of some, patronage networks the disposition of others. And the sheer size of both the party and the government in the PRC, being responsible for almost a billion and half people or one-sixth of the

¹⁴² Saunders and Wuthnow, "Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping," 519-556.

¹⁴³ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 26.

world's population, means that any attempt to change the status quo is a massive undertaking.

Deng Xiaoping was able to change the political direction of China for two reasons. First, Mao's Cultural Revolution had brought China to its knees and both the political elite and the people of China were ready for a change. Deng capitalized on this desire for change and pushed through several reforms in the political sphere meant to stabilize and institutionalize politics of the era. Second, his efforts were renewed when the CCP witnessed the fall of their fellow communist regimes and the near-toppling of their own between 1989 and 1991. As such, Deng's early reforms were reinvigorated and the CCP and PRC were able to establish strong rules and norms concerning succession, decision-making, party and government offices, and the triangular relationship between the state, the people, and the party.

Xi Jinping has undoubtedly changed many of those rules and norms developed under Deng. However, how he was able to do so is not clear, although two possibilities immediately come to mind. First, like Deng, Xi may have utilized a carrot, capitalizing on elite discontent with the inability of Xi's predecessor to push forward what were perceived as necessary economic reforms in order to convince the political elite that centralizing power in him would allow the country to execute those reforms. Second, Xi may have employed a stick, a sweeping anti-corruption campaign distinguished from past efforts by its scope, its scale, and its ability to target individuals at all levels of the party and the government. Together, these two methods may have combined to ensure Xi's success in centralizing power. The following two chapters will rigorously test these hypotheses, placing each in the proper context and examining if these factors played a role in changing the direction of the pendulum.

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III. XI JINPING, A WELCOME STRONGMAN

A. INTRODUCTION: A NEW CONSENSUS?

One of the biggest obstacles to institutional reform within any organization are the members of the institution themselves. Having grown accustomed to and having benefitted from certain rules and norms within an organization, the membership will likely be reluctant to change the status quo. Xi Jinping's reform efforts, although part of a cycle in Chinese politics, are likely no different in that they too would have faced strong opposition from entrenched members of the CCP. These members of both the state and the party within the PRC have few incentives to change the organization because, in doing so, they risk the benefits of membership to which they have grown accustomed. However, we have not seen a dramatic backlash to the agenda and the policies of power centralization within the CCP. This lack of backlash indicates that something else may be at work in the political system of the PRC. While the membership of an organization will in general prefer the status quo, this preference not static. Outside catalysts can change membership preferences. In Xi's effort to change the Chinese political system, the inability of his predecessor Hu Jintao to carry out crucial economic reforms seems to have been one such catalyst, changing the preferences of CCP members from an affinity for institutional politics to a desire for personal politics.

Such a narrative is in direct contrast with the story that Xi has forced political reforms on the CCP and the PRC as a whole. Both cannot be correct, but both have been used to explain Xi's ability to carry out his own political program within the CCP. This chapter will evaluate the evidence for the assertion that Xi's changes had the backing of the CCP. The following chapter will evaluate one critical component of the narrative that Xi has forced changes in the Chinese political system—the anticorruption campaign.

To demonstrate Xi had the CCP's backing to initiate his political reforms, it must be demonstrated that there was reason for Chinese leaders to be frustrated with reform under Hu, that Chinese leaders were indeed frustrated with the status quo, and that they pushed for change within the Chinese political system. Crucially, if Chinese leaders were

truly reacting to Hu's failure to push through economic reforms, it must be demonstrated that they viewed this failure not necessarily as a result of Hu's weak leadership, but certainly as an indictment of the system of collective leadership as a whole. There seems to be ample evidence to support all these points. In the first place, Hu embarked on several major economic reforms but, by the end of this second term, he had failed to deliver. Second, Chinese leaders reacted quickly to the reform stagnation by diagnosing the problem—the weak leadership of then CCP and PRC leader Hu. Hu, while a capable technocrat, has been portrayed as a status quo leader, reluctant to embark on any major reforms that would have ran up against the entrenched interests of the state. The perception that Hu failed to push through necessary reforms during his decade in power was so widespread that many observers call his period of rule China's "ten lost years" or China's "lost decade."¹⁴⁴

Hu's failure to implement reforms facilitated the second rationale in the decision to centralize power—dissatisfaction with the system of collective leadership. Because the system of collective leadership became closely associated with Hu and his personal leadership, the CCP seems to have conflated the two and doomed them both. In the lead up to the Eighteen Party Congress, Chinese leaders repeatedly expressed a desire to centralize political power in order to better implement political-economic reforms by overcoming special interests in Chinese society. Even a joint Chinese government-World Bank study suggested the establishment of a centralized, all-powerful reform committee to push through necessary reforms in face of strong opposition.¹⁴⁵ This general feeling only makes sense as a reaction to the perceived failure of the collective leadership system. In an effort to revitalize the reform process, Chinese leaders actively chose to shift away from such a system.

¹⁴⁴ David L. Shambaugh, "Assessing China's New Leadership One Year On" (Cross-Strait Developments in 2013: New Trends and Prospects, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 16; Ian Johnson, "China's Lost Decade," ChinaFile, September 27, 2012, <http://www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/chinas-lost-decade>.

¹⁴⁵ Development Research Center of the State Council of the PRC and World Bank, "China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious, and Creative Society" (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013).

On the other hand, the factual evidence suggests that there was more at work in China than simply Hu's weak leadership. Indeed, the CCP may have misdiagnosed the problem. Hu may have been a weak leader, but he also presided over the world's worst economic disaster—the Global Financial Crisis (GFC)—which would have set reforms back in the PRC no matter who held the top positions in country. Yet almost entirely absent from the CCP's narrative surrounding the ineffectiveness of Hu and the collective leadership system is the effect of both the GFC and the Chinese response to it had on the ability of Hu to carry out important economic reforms. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Chinese leaders clearly saw their response to the GFC as a great success, praising to role of economic centralization in preventing economic disaster. This profuse praise of the Chinese response and the idea that the country came out relatively unharmed by the GFC gave Chinese leaders all the more reason to blame Hu and the political system he presided over for the stagnation of economic reforms.

After examining the available evidence, it is clear that Chinese leaders were frustrated by said economic reform stagnation, as evidenced by their repeated calls in the lead-up to the Eighteenth Party Congress for a change in the status quo. This frustration, which may have been limited to dissatisfaction with Hu himself in other contexts, expanded to included dissatisfaction with the system of the collective leadership because that system became more institutionalized under Hu and therefore more associated with him. This dissatisfaction with the current system, combined with a selective understanding of the Chinese success during the GFC, led the CCP to push to centralized power at the Eighteenth Party Congress in order to revive economic reform, allowing Xi to begin his process of power centralization upon taking office. However, although the party ultimately began the correct treatment for their diagnosis of the problem, the CCP's diagnosis itself was incorrect. Although the GFC and the Chinese response to it played a larger role in the reform stagnation than Hu or the system of collective leadership did, the CCP elected to praise their response to the GFC crisis as a success, preventing them from correctly perceiving the flaws within their own political-economic system.

This chapter will assess the narrative that Chinese leaders fixated on the idea that Hu Jintao and the system of collective leadership prevented the implementation of essential

reforms and therefore gravitated toward Xi Jinping's program of centralized leadership. In order to test the validity of this assertion, I will begin with a brief history of economic reform in China as it relates to Chinese politics, demonstrating that reform up until Hu Jintao had been relatively easy. Next, I will examine Hu Jintao's tenure, beginning with Hu's blueprint for reform and continuing on with a discussion concerning why that reform failed. I will compare competing narratives—a failure of leadership and an inevitable failure—and demonstrate that, while the latter is likely more accurate, Chinese leaders settled on the former as the definitive explanation. Finally, I will discuss what arose from the Chinese leadership's impression that collective leadership caused reform failure, namely calls for a centralization of power in the lead up to the Eighteenth Party Congress and Xi Jinping's answers to those calls.

B. THE STRUGGLES OF REFORM

Reform in the PRC has never been easy, but it has definitely been harder for some leaders than it has been for others. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Reform Era began with Deng Xiaoping and his efforts to reshape the Chinese political-economic system. On the political side, Deng worked to shift politics away from the personal politics of Mao and to the institutional politics of the Reform Era. At the same time, Deng worked to recreate the Chinese economy, attempting to transition from a state-run economy to a market-driven one. As evidenced in the last chapter, reforms along both these axes were difficult. Deng was forced to overcome conservatives at every step and reform was not a smooth process, but rather a stop and go affair.¹⁴⁶ But Deng, thanks to his own revolutionary credentials, the backlash to the Cultural Revolution, and the fear that the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR had instilled in Chinese leaders, was successful in pursuing reform in both the political and economic directions. That momentum carried over to the PRC's and CCP's next leader, Jiang Zemin.

Jiang, and importantly his premier, Zhu Rongji, were also able to successfully pursue reform in both the economic and political dimensions. Politically, Jiang was able to

¹⁴⁶ Shambaugh, *China's Future*, 98.

leverage his appointment by Deng (along with the fact that Deng survived to continue to oversee political reform until 1995) in order to continue the process of institutionalizing Chinese politics. Indeed, Jiang oversaw the ascension of a younger, better educated set of leaders to positions of power in the Chinese politics system. Economically, reform had become much more difficult, as Jiang and Zhu were running up against several of the problems that would bedevil their successors mere years later. The backlash to economic reform from conservatives and special interests alike required shrewd measures by both Jiang and Zhu to achieve the necessary reform goals. Even then, their efforts came close to being defeated a number of times.

Most prominently, Jiang and Zhu leveraged the desire of Chinese leaders to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO) to drive economic reform. The PRC initially applied to join the WTO (technically, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs or GATT at the time) in 1986 but were not able to come to an accession agreement with the major countries in the WTO—the U.S., the E.U., and Japan—until November of 1999.¹⁴⁷ These countries, concerned that PRC’s non-market economy would jeopardize their own competitive advantage in the global marketplace, demanded that the PRC make accession “commercially viable” by implementing a series of reforms to their own economy.¹⁴⁸ Jiang and Zhu were able to leverage this increasing international pressure to push through crucial economic reforms in within the PRC, but this did not occur without backlash. Conservatives, incited by the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and several initial failures to actually sign an accession agreement in early 1999, come out strong against Zhu and, by extension, Jiang. Criticism reached such a fevered pitch that it appeared further reform and WTO accession itself would be put off for a number of years. Luckily, Jiang and Zhu were able to regain control of the party within a few weeks and signed an agreement in November of 1999 assuring accession in December of 2001.

While the PRC’s entry into the WTO is undoubtedly an important step in Chinese political-economy, the reforms that accompanied that accession are arguably of greater

¹⁴⁷ Joseph Fewsmith, “China and the WTO,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, November 1999, <http://www.nbr.org>.

¹⁴⁸ Fewsmith, 2.

importance generally and of greater significance within this study. Without the role international pressure, Jiang and Zhu may have been hard-pressed to actually maintain the momentum of economic reform that Deng had started. Just a few years later, Jiang and Zhu's successors, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao would be forced confront the same challenges in their push for reform. However, Hu and Wen would lack the leverage that the WTO accession gave Jiang and Zhu, and the consequences of that were unsurprising.

C. REFORM AND CONSOLIDATION UNDER HU

When Hu Jintao took power after the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, hopes were high that he would continue the reforms that his predecessors had started. Indeed, Hu expressed a willingness to do just that. Speaking directly to the Chinese people in a nationally televised address during the 10th NPC in March of 2003, he committed himself and the leadership to further reforms that would open up the country both politically and economically and facilitate the growth of the PRC into a prosperous nation.¹⁴⁹ Hu had been given put on solid ground to do so. The smoothness of his own transition to power was a clear indication that, at least at that time, the institutions meant to govern Chinese politics were solidifying. Economically, Jiang and Zhu's work to bring the PRC into the WTO was beginning to pay off as Hu entered office. Between 2000 and 2010, the PRC's average GDP growth rate was just over ten percent per year, with a huge spike in growth occurring between 2004 and 2007 as WTO accession finally began to take effect.¹⁵⁰

That being said, when Hu took office in 2002, the challenges of success were quickly becoming apparent. To his credit, Hu was able to quickly identify these challenges and worked quickly to identify solutions to deal with them. Foremost among these challenges was the problem of unequal economic growth. While the PRC was indeed growing at an average of ten percent throughout that decade, that growth was not spread equally across all of Chinese society. The divide primarily fell across distinct geographical lines. Growth was concentrated in the coastal, urban regions of the country and barely

¹⁴⁹ Xiangwei Wang, "Hu Jintao Commits New Leaders to Reforms," *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2003, <https://www.scmp.com/article/409836/hu-jintao-commits-new-leaders-reforms>.

¹⁵⁰ World Bank, "China's GDP Growth," accessed April 13, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2010&locations=CN&start=2000>.

reached into the inland, rural regions. As such, the disparities between different parts of Chinese society began to grow and the Gini coefficient—a measure of wealth inequality within a country—reached 0.46 in 2010. In addition to the large problem of inequality, Hu and his fellow leaders were confronted with environmental degradation and social unrest, all resulting from the massive growth in Chinese GDP throughout their time in office.

To address these growing challenges, Hu embarked on a promising series of reforms when he took office. Like all Chinese leaders before him, Hu attempted to codify his own thoughts on governance and implement a guiding ideology for his time in office. That ideology came in the form of the “scientific development concept.”¹⁵¹ As he articulated in September of 2003,

It is necessary to adopt a scientific development concept of coordinated, all-around, and sustainable development, actively explore a new development path that conforms to reality...combine the promotion of urban development with the promotion of rural development...and strive to take a civilized development path characterized by the development of production, a well-off life, and a good ecological environment.¹⁵²

Essentially, Hu was aiming to promote policies that would ensure equitable, manageable growth as opposed to policies that were singularly focused on economic growth at the expense of all else. During the Third Plenum of the Sixteenth Central Committee held in October of 2003, the upper echelons of the CCP blessed Hu’s approach, signing on to his ideas if not Hu’s moniker for them.¹⁵³ They accordingly adopted a plan that focused on spreading the benefits of economic growth, dealing with its environmental consequences, and, perhaps most importantly, moving the basis for Chinese economic growth away from exports and investment and to domestic consumption.¹⁵⁴

If the scientific development concept was meant to reorient the direction of the PRC’s growth, the concept of a “socialist harmonious society” was meant to deal with the

¹⁵¹ Joseph Fewsmith, “Promoting the Scientific Development Concept,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 11 (July 30, 2004): 1-10.

¹⁵² “Hu Jintao Inspects Work in Jiangxi, Stresses Need To Develop Fine Traditions,” *Xinhua*, September 2, 2003, Open Source Enterprise.

¹⁵³ Fewsmith, “Promoting the Scientific Development Concept,” 1-10.

¹⁵⁴ Miller, “Dilemmas of Globalization and Governance,” 528-599.

social problems already arising from the PRC's inequitable growth. By 2006, the Gini coefficient in China had reached 0.46, a sign of rampant inequality across the country.¹⁵⁵ The Chinese people themselves were noticing; between 1993 and 2005, the number of mass incidents of protest across the country had grown tenfold, from 8,700 incidents to 87,000.¹⁵⁶ To address these problems, the Sixth Plenum of the Sixteenth Central Committee in October of 2006 passed a resolution focused on "major issues concerning the building of socialist harmonious society."¹⁵⁷ The product of two long years of Hu Jintao's work and lobbying, the resolution aimed to correct the growth imbalances between the rural and urban areas of the country, to redress "imbalances in regional development after two decades' emphasis on fast economic growth in China's coastal regions."¹⁵⁸

In addition to lofty political reform, Hu's tenure also saw the further consolidation of institutional politics in the form of collective leadership. Twenty-two of twenty-five members of the PSC ushered in during the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002 as part of the leadership change between Jiang and Hu had college degrees.¹⁵⁹ The average age of the Sixteenth Party Congress PSC member was sixty, down from the Fifteenth Party Congress PSC's average of sixty-three, while, with respect to the Central Committee as a whole, the average age fell from 55.9 to 55.4.¹⁶⁰ Also of note are the structural changes to the Politburo and the PSC itself. The number of members on the Politburo was expanded from twenty-four to twenty-five between the Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Party Congresses, while, over that same period, the number of members on the PSC was expanded from seven to nine, reflecting a diffusion of decision-making power to more party members.¹⁶¹ Under Hu, the institutions of collective leadership that Deng Xiaoping had established early in the reform

¹⁵⁵ Miller, 528-599.

¹⁵⁶ Miller, 528-599.

¹⁵⁷ Alice Lyman Miller, "Hu Jintao and the Sixth Plenum," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 20 (February 28, 2007): 1-12.

¹⁵⁸ Miller, 1-12.

¹⁵⁹ Miller, "Dilemmas of Globalization and Governance," 528-599.

¹⁶⁰ Miller, 528-599; Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*.

¹⁶¹ Miller, "Dilemmas of Globalization and Governance," 528-599; Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 51.

era were truly coming into their own, becoming more and more associated with Hu and therefore with his eventually failure to implement reform.

Discussion of the power structure within the Chinese media reflected this new emphasis on collective leadership under Hu. Under Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin, Chinese media referenced the party leadership by naming Jiang as the core leader, usually in the formulation of "the Party Central Committee with Comrade Jiang Zemin as the core leader."¹⁶² Contrary to their practices under Jiang, the Chinese media under Hu eliminated the moniker of "core leader" instead opting for the formulation "the Party Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary."¹⁶³ Furthermore, the Chinese media occasionally referred to the leadership team under Hu as the "Hu-Wen leadership," a unique formulation that had not been seen in Chinese media until that time.¹⁶⁴ Clearly, the state was making efforts to further the consolidation of collective leadership and those efforts became more pronounced under Hu.

Hu's two reform concepts—scientific development and socialist, harmonious society—formed the basis of Hu's aspirational reform goals, and the consolidation of institutional politics early in his tenure gave his initial rule a tinge of optimism. However, as Hu entered his second term as leader of both the PRC and CCP in 2007, factors originating both within and outside of his control made it impossible for him to actually pursue his lofty economic goals and made the consolidation of collective leadership during his tenure a political liability. In fact, in contrast with his first term, Hu did not announce any new reform initiatives during his second term, indicating a clear stall in the reform process, especially on the economic front.¹⁶⁵ This stall in reform can be explained by two separate variables. First, the GFC and the PRC's response to it may have prevent Hu from following through on many of his economic reforms. Second, the system of collective

¹⁶² Miller, "Hu Jintao and the Sixth Plenum," 1-12.

¹⁶³ Alice Lyman Miller, "National People's Congress Completes Jiang-Hu Succession," *Chinese Leadership Monitor*, no. 14 (April 30, 2005): 1-6.

¹⁶⁴ Miller, "Hu Jintao and the Sixth Plenum," 1-12.

¹⁶⁵ Alice Lyman Miller, Alice Miller- Leadership Transition: Implications for China's Domestic Development and External Relations, Video, November 14, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/53554080>.

leadership, which seemed to consolidate during Hu's time in office, may have resulted in such a diffusion of power across the Chinese political system that Hu was unable to push through economic reforms. Both these explanations will be evaluated in the following sections to both ascertain which factor actually caused the stall in reform and understand which factor Chinese leaders believed caused the stall in reform.

D. AN INEVITABLE FAILURE: THE ROLE OF THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

To the casual observer, the PRC and its leaders seemed to have weathered the GFC of 2007 and 2008 relatively well. The country rapidly rebounded from a brief economic slump and continued its stellar economic growth despite the anemic growth across much of the developed world. From such a vantage point, it does not seem that the GFC had much of an effect on Hu's policy implementation. However, digging deeper, it soon becomes apparent that the strategies the government used to prevent economic catastrophe in late 2007 and 2008 may have spelled doom for Hu's reform agenda. Such policies reinforced economic sectors and continued economic practices that Hu was attempting to reform with his policies. Ultimately, Hu may have spelled his own political doom, succeeding at saving the Chinese economy (and arguably the CCP and the government) but dooming his reform agenda in the process.

Within the PRC, the collapse of the American economy and the world economy more broadly led to the depressed exports, as consumption in developed countries rapidly decreased. Exports fell 2.2 percent in November and December of 2008, a rapid turnaround considering the eighteen percent growth in exports just a month before.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, industrial production fell from an 8.2 percent growth rate in October to a 5.4 percent growth rate in November.¹⁶⁷ Seeing the indicators of an impending economic collapse due to a collapse in the demand for exports, the Chinese government acted swiftly. On November 5, 2008, the PRC's State Council met and announced a four trillion-yuan (\$586 billion)

¹⁶⁶ John Wong, "China's Economy 2008 and Outlook for 2009: Crisis of a Sharp Slowdown," in *China and the Global Economic Crisis*, ed. Zheng Yongnian and Sarah Y. Tong (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2010): 20-29.

¹⁶⁷ Wong, 20-29.

stimulus package to be distributed primarily through investment.¹⁶⁸ At the same time, the central elements of the CCP met and circulated Central Document No.18 of 2008, which laid out ten steps that the government and party would be taking to avert the crisis, including details about the implementation of the stimulus and the implementation of expansionary monetary policies.¹⁶⁹

The effects of the Chinese government's decisive action seem to vindicate its response. Employment stopped declining and output began to grow once again by mid-year 2009.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, during years in which nearly every other country's GDP growth rate was tumbling, the PRC's GDP growth rate retained its incredible heights. In 2008, the year in which the crisis hit, the PRC managed to maintain a 9.6 percent GDP growth rate. In 2009, the first full year of crisis, the PRC's GDP growth fell slightly to 9.4 percent but rebounded to 10.6 percent in 2010.¹⁷¹ By contrast, the U.S. GDP growth rate during those same years was -.3 percent, -2.8 percent, and 2.5 percent respectively. A casual observer would easily believe that the Chinese response to the GFC was an astounding success.

However, when put in the context of the political and economic reforms that Hu Jintao and the Chinese leadership were attempting to implement, the Chinese response could not have been a greater setback for the reform agenda. In the first place, seeing declining rates of return on massive investments in capital in the years leading up to the GFC, the government had been attempting to shift the development model away from investment and exports and toward domestic consumption to put the country on a more stable growth path. To this end, the PRC had initiated painful reforms to reign in the massive amounts of investment coming from the banking system. Budget constraints were hardened, management systems were restructured, the banks themselves were

¹⁶⁸ Barry Naughton, "China's Response to the Global Crisis and Lessons Learned," in *The Global Recession and China's Political Economy*, ed. Dali L Yang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 15-32.

¹⁶⁹ Naughton, 15-32.

¹⁷⁰ Barry Naughton, "China and the Two Crisis," in *Two Crises, Different Outcomes: East Asia and Global Finance*, ed. T. J. Pempel, Keiichi Tsunekawa, and M. Chatib Basri, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015): 110-134.

¹⁷¹ World Bank, "China's GDP Growth."

recapitalized, and billions of RMB worth of non-performing loans were written off.¹⁷² But the PRC's response to the GFC—namely the massive stimulus, low interest rates, and low reserve requirements—sent signals to banks that these reforms were being cast aside to save the national economy. Believing that they would no longer be held to the high standards, bank managers at both the national and local level initiated a no-holds-barred lending spree, resulting in an increase in the share of investment in the economy, exactly the opposite of what Hu and his comrades had been attempting to do.

In addition to the bank reforms, government and party leaders had been attempting to enact crucial reforms in order to put the PRC on track toward a more efficient, market-based economy. However, during the GFC, these reforms were also put on hold. As Naughton states, “the GFC response was to strengthen the state sector, legitimize increased government steering of the economy, and bring the financial sector back under government tutelage as an instrument of government policy.”¹⁷³ Instead of engendering crucial reforms in the political economic system, the GFC reversed them. Instead of market reforms, the state took on a larger role in economy, again the exact opposite of what the Hu had been trying to do up to that time. Ultimately, the Chinese response to the GFC, while likely necessary to prevent the collapse of the Chinese economy (and ergo the CCP itself), undoubtedly prevented any chance of further economic reform while Hu Jintao was in office. Whether this would have been true of any other leader is uncertain, but the extent of the incentives created by the response and the setback the response dealt to the government seems to suggest that Hu's failure to effectively implement reform in the wake of the GFC was out of his control.

The problem for Hu is that Chinese elite may not have necessarily perceived that to have been the case. In fact, it seems that Chinese leaders may have perceived the exact opposite, believing that the Chinese response to the GFC was an astounding success and a vindication of the Chinese political-economic model. Mentions of this “China Model” in official Chinese media peaked in 2008 and 2009, painting the Chinese system, which had

¹⁷² Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Adaptation and Growth*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), 115-118.

¹⁷³ Naughton, “China and the Two Crisis,” 110-134.

produced the economic recovery, in a favorable light when compared to the Western system and its sluggish recovery.¹⁷⁴ Further evidence of this triumphal spirit is seen in the government work report presented at the NPC in March of 2010 by Premier Wen Jiabao. While Wen certainly acknowledges the GFC and the Chinese recovery have resulted in a series of economic challenges, he also praises “the socialist system’s advantages, which enable us to make decisions efficiently, organize effectively, and concentrate resources to accomplish large undertakings.”¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, while this may not be the opinion of Wen as an individual, the government work report certainly reflects the conclusion of CCP leadership as a whole.¹⁷⁶ And if the CCP viewed the response to GFC in such a favorable light, they inevitably found another scapegoat to explain the failure of economic reforms.

E. A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP: HU JINTAO AND THE SYSTEM OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Having praised the response of the Chinese government to the GFC and the system that they perceived to have facilitated that response, Chinese leaders could not immediately turn their back on such statements in the face of slowing economic reforms after the GFC. Instead, blame for this slowdown fell to the man who headed the government and the party—Hu Jintao. Hu was an easy target for criticism, possessing many personal and professional qualities that made him seem indecisive and overly cautious. And because the system of collective leadership became so closely associated with Hu, having been nearly consolidate under his term, criticism of Hu turned into criticism of the system as a whole, eventually paving the way for the consolidation of power in the hands of Hu’s successor Xi Jinping.

¹⁷⁴ David Bandurski, “How Should We Read China’s ‘Discourse of Greatness’?,” China Media Project, February 23, 2010, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2010/02/23/reading-the-political-climate-in-chinas-discourse-of-greatness/>.

¹⁷⁵ Jiabao Wen, “Report on the Work of the Government (2010),” March 14, 2010, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Speeches/2010-03/19/content_1564308.htm.

¹⁷⁶ Barry Naughton, “Reading the NPC: Post-Crisis Economic Dilemmas of the Chinese Leadership,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 32 (May 11, 2010), <https://www.hoover.org/research/reading-npc-post-crisis-economic-dilemmas-chinese-leadership>.

1. Hu's the Problem

In order to explain why reform stalled post-GFC, Chinese leaders immediately turned to Hu's personal qualities and the system of collective leadership. From the beginning, it was obvious to many observers that Hu Jintao did not possess the charisma or presence of his predecessors, a problem that did not become obvious until it became a liability in his drive to implement his reform agenda. In his entire time in office, Hu made only a single, on-the-record joke (concerning the practice of elderly Chinese leaders to dye their hair), exemplifying Hu's extreme dullness and the fact that, as some officials have privately admitted, "their leader doesn't do emotion."¹⁷⁷ In fact, things got so bad under Hu, who frequently spoke in the sterile, hollow language of Chinese leaders, that the CCP supposedly began issuing directives to make meetings more engaging and eliminate "empty and rigmarole talks."¹⁷⁸ More damaging in the eyes of his critics than the simple fact that many consider Hu to be dull and boring is the fact that Hu is often publicly quiet, noncommittal, or even absent altogether when crises occur. When it came to the personnel controversies surrounding Wang Lijun, Bo Xilai, or Chen Liangyu or the 2008 and 2009 uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang respectively, Hu delegated the response to the propaganda organs of the CCP and emphasized the institutional role in resolving the matters as opposed to his own personal role.¹⁷⁹

Hu's propensity to emphasize the party routine over his personal political influence can likely be attributed, at least partially, to his political pedigree. Hu rose to power as a member of the CCYL, an organization meant to develop communist leaders from all backgrounds, and he therefore had to work through the CCP's winding bureaucracies before assuming his leadership position. As such, Hu and fellow CCYL alumni like him generally have few connections the elite of Chinese society and little background in finance

¹⁷⁷ Kerry Brown, "Hu Jintao's Legacy," *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/08/hu-jintaos-legacy/>.

¹⁷⁸ Louisa Lim, "China's Communists Declare War ... On Boring Meetings," NPR.org, December 5, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/12/05/166562850/chinas-communists-declare-war-on-boring-meetings>.

¹⁷⁹ Kerry Brown, "The Soapbox and the Truncheon: Hu Jintao's Amorphous Power," *China Brief* 12, no. 14 (July 19, 2012), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-soapbox-and-the-truncheon-hu-jintaos-amorphous-power/>.

or economics.¹⁸⁰ Instead, most alumni of the CCYL developed most of their political experience while working in the areas of party propaganda and party organization.¹⁸¹ As a result, Hu has become a true party technocrat, an individual skilled in managing large bureaucracies and formulating policies but lacking the political gravitas or will to push through difficult but necessary political-economic reforms. Simply looking at the names, he chose for his signature policy initiatives—“scientific development concept” and “socialist harmonious society”—demonstrates this point.¹⁸² Ultimately, Hu’s experience in the party bureaucracy likely preconditioned him to be the “technocratic caretaker” of the status quo, an individual able to effectively maintain the status quo within the country but unable to bring his skills to bear on the tough problem of reform.¹⁸³

2. Guilty by Association

With Hu being personally criticized for his failure to push through reform, that CCP soon set its sights on the system of collective leadership that had become closely associated with Hu during his time in office. Initial criticism, however, was not aimed directly at the system of collective leadership, but on the need for reform in general, and such criticism over advocated for further democratic reforms, not power consolidation. One of the earliest voices for further reform was, paradoxically, Premier Wen Jiabao, who, as early as 2010, had been calling for substantial political and economic reform. In just over a forty-day period in August and September of 2010, Wen discussed political reform seven distinct times in several different contexts.¹⁸⁴ He continued to do so regularly and frequently for the next several years, the lone voice calling for “adhering to the governing of the nation

¹⁸⁰ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 279-299.

¹⁸¹ Li, 279-299.

¹⁸² Elizabeth Economy, “Hu Jintao’s Legacy of Danger and Opportunity for Xi Jinping,” Council on Foreign Relations, November 8, 2012, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/hu-jintaos-legacy-danger-and-opportunity-xi-jinping>.

¹⁸³ Johnson, “China’s Lost Decade.”

¹⁸⁴ David Bandurski, “Premier Wen Calls for Political Reform, Again,” China Media Project, September 15, 2011, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2011/09/15/premier-wen-calls-for-political-reform-again/>.

by rule of law” and “the democratic rights of the people.”¹⁸⁵ In late 2011, Wen was joined by then-Communist Party Secretary of Guangdong province Wang Yang who, responding to violence and unrest within his province in late 2011, professed the need to mount aggressive political and economic reform to fix inequities within those systems.¹⁸⁶ Wang’s call was only strengthened when Premier Wen Jiabao appeared in Guangdong in January of 2012 to commemorate Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour, significant because Wen echoed Wang’s calls but more importantly because such calls happened fit perfectly with the object of the commemoration, Deng’s trip to the Southern provinces in an attempt to revitalize economic reform.¹⁸⁷ During a press conference in March, Wen referenced the elections in the village of Wukan that had ended the unrest in Guangdong as an example of the success of political reforms: “If people can run a village well...they can manage a country.”¹⁸⁸ Clearly, talk of reform to the political system was well underway by spring of 2012, mere months before the Eighteenth Party Congress.

That same spring, the conservative backlash began. Various editorials in prominent newspapers within the PRC began equating reform to “assaulting fortified positions.”¹⁸⁹ That phrase, until the spring of 2012, had not been frequently used, suggesting its consistent appearance in the spring of 2012 was meant to highlight the urgent need for reform in the run up to the Eighteenth Party Congress.¹⁹⁰ Such widespread commentary on the need for political reform to facilitate economic reform caught the attention of the party. The following summer, the Central Party School in its journal *Red Flag* began calling for reform, but, significantly, this commentary stressed the need for the CCP to maintain its

¹⁸⁵ Bandurski.

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Fewsmith, “Guangdong Leads Calls to Break Up ‘Vested Interests’ and Revive Reform,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 37 (April 30, 2012): 1-9.

¹⁸⁷ Fewsmith, 1-9.

¹⁸⁸ Malcolm Moore, “China’s Wen Jiabao Calls for ‘urgent’ Political Reform,” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 14, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9142333/Chinas-Wen-Jiabao-calls-for-urgent-political-reform.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Peter Mattis, “The Limits of Reform: Assaulting the Castle of the Status Quo,” *China Brief* 12, no. 9 (April 27, 2012), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-limits-of-reform-assaulting-the-castle-of-the-status-quo/>.

¹⁹⁰ Mattis.

power while implementing such reform.¹⁹¹ The rule of the CCP, one author wrote, “suits China’s national conditions and is in accord with the fundamental interests of the people.”¹⁹² Clearly, the party recognized the necessity of some political change to facilitate reform in other areas but knew that the democratic changes advocated by some would threaten the CCP’s rule.

Most of the criticism of the collective leadership system itself began to circulate in the lead up to the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012, a sign that the CCP was preparing to make important changes at this crucial political juncture. By August of that year, the CCP seemed to have formulated their answer to the debate over political reform taking place within the party. An official party journal, *Seeking Truth*, took aim at the system of collective leadership directly, claiming that the system had led rampant corruption and ineffective policymaking resulting from the diffusion of political power.¹⁹³ Having the answer to their political reform problem in hand, the Chinese leadership then moved to make it official in the Eighteenth Party Congress in November of 2012.

The Eighteenth Party Congress ended what debate there was over the direction of political reform and opened the door for Xi Jinping to begin his process of power consolidation. In the most obvious structural reform resulting from the congress, the PSC was reduced from nine to seven members, shrinking to most powerful decision-making body in the PRC in order to more easily achieve consensus in the future.¹⁹⁴ To be fair, the move puts current size of the PSC more in line with the past, but it certainly consolidates power within the hands of the remaining members.¹⁹⁵ More significant, though, was the content of the Eighteenth Party Congress work report as presented by Hu as one of his last duties as general secretary of the CCP. The report made no mention of collective

¹⁹¹ Peter Mattis, “Central Party School’s Critiques Suggest New Leadership Dynamics,” *China Brief* 12, no. 12 (June 22, 2012), <https://jamestown.org/program/central-party-schools-critiques-suggest-new-leadership-dynamics/>.

¹⁹² Mattis.

¹⁹³ Sangkuk Lee, “An Institutional Analysis of Xi Jinping’s Centralization of Power,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105 (May 4, 2017): 325–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1245505>.

¹⁹⁴ Alice Lyman Miller, “The New Party Politburo Leadership,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 40 (January 14, 2013), <https://www.hoover.org/research/new-party-politburo-leadership>.

¹⁹⁵ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 51.

leadership, the watchword of the past few decades, indeed the very system so many had been working to institutionalize over the years.¹⁹⁶ Instead, Hu stated that “the Party should improve the mechanism for coordinating structural reforms and conduct major reforms in a holistic way according to the overall plan,” clearly suggesting that power needed to be brought back to the center.¹⁹⁷ He continued by suggesting that such political reform must precede reform in any other area, a clear indication that his successor would need to centralize power in order to successfully pursue other reforms.¹⁹⁸ All in all, Hu’s speech seemed to be a major setback for those who supported the collective leadership system and a boon for those who wanted to see centralized political control.

F. CONCLUSION: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Overall, it seems Xi’s centralization of power beginning with his ascendance to the top offices of the CCP and PRC at the Eighteenth Party Congress was encouraged by members within the CCP who had grown frustrated with economic reform stagnation under Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao. Hu’s economic reforms were greatly impeded by the GFC and the Chinese response to it, but Chinese leaders chose to see such reform stagnation as the result of weak leadership on Hu’s part. As a result, Hu has been frequently cast as an ineffective, boring, quiet, emotionless, and technocratic leader incapable of pushing through tough economic reforms. CCP frustration with Hu eventually expanded to include frustration with the system of collective leadership itself, leading to calls from many within the CCP to embark on political reform. Ultimately, such calls provided the backdrop to the Eighteenth Party Congress at which it seems Xi was given *carte blanche* to reform the Chinese political system by pursuing policies of power centralization.

However, to place the blame for the failure to reform at the feet of Hu and the system of collective leadership is not entirely fair. In the first place, the GFC and the PRC’s response to it certainly affected, if not completely reversed, the reforms Hu was trying to implement. Although Hu certainly had a large hand in implementing the Chinese response

¹⁹⁶ Lee, “An Institutional Analysis of Xi Jinping’s Centralization of Power,” 325–36.

¹⁹⁷ Lee, 325–36.

¹⁹⁸ Lee, 325–36.

to the GFC, he did not seem to have much of a choice, especially if his primary concern was the continuation of CCP rule in the PRC. Even so, Hu's reforms did demonstrate some promise, specifically in the area of income inequality. In 2004, rural consumption began to catch-up with urban consumption, and, relatedly, by 2011 half of all Chinese provinces achieved urban wages within ten percent of the national average.¹⁹⁹ But this limited success was not enough to outweigh another set of factors that likely limited reform post-GFC—an incredibly entrenched web of special interests reinforced by structural impediments to reform.

While Hu's reform goals as exemplified in the scientific development concept and the socialist harmonious society were noble, Hu was unable to implement them in the face of staunch resistance from sectors that would have ultimately lost as a result of the reform Hu was advocating. Most of these problems came on the economic front. While Hu made some progress on economic inequality issues, even this progress was not enough to stop the growth of inequality within the PRC, as the structural challenges of an industrializing economy managed by corrupt local governments allowed the Gini coefficient to rise unabated throughout Hu's time in office.²⁰⁰ With respect to the development of a holistic approach to growth, institutions governing the conduct of party cadre proved difficult to reform. Although party cadre were instructed to focus on a broad definition of development to include environmental sustainability, economic growth, seated at the top in terms of priorities, proved hard to unseat.²⁰¹ As such, environmental and social problems continued apace. However, the single biggest problem facing Hu and other Chinese leaders was the underlying network of corruption within the PRC. Stretching up to the highest levels of the government and the party, it was estimated that corruption cost the Chinese economy \$84.4 billion or five percent of the PRC's GDP that year.²⁰² Such a profitable system undoubtedly

¹⁹⁹ Arthur R. Kroeber, *China's Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 201-203.

²⁰⁰ Kroeber, 197.

²⁰¹ Naughton, *The Chinese Economy*, 95-125.

²⁰² C. Fred Bergsten, Institute for International Economics (U.S.), and Centre for Strategic and International Studies, eds., *China: The Balance Sheet: What the World Needs to Know Now about the Emerging Superpower*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

produced staunch defenders. Up to the beginning of Hu's tenure, Chinese leaders had not had to face these problems directly, as the piecemeal transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy facilitated gradual changes. Yet, despite the genius of such a system, the Chinese leadership was inevitably going to have to face these tough obstacles, and that job ultimately fell to Hu.

Whether or not the failure to implement economic reforms under Hu Jintao was the result of his own political shortcomings, those of system which he oversaw, or the GFC over which he had no control, the result remains the same—failure to enact meaningful reforms across many different areas led Chinese leaders to lose faith in the system of collective leadership and institutional politics and shift to a system of centralized leadership and personal politics. As such, the door opened for Xi to begin a reversal of the trend toward institutional politics that had dominated the Chinese political sphere since the 1970s. Elected general secretary of the CCP at the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012 and president at the NPC the following March, Xi began to aggressively pursue his vision of top-down policymaking. In fact, the pace and aggressiveness of Xi's reform indicate a zeal not matched by his two immediate predecessors, a factor that can be partially attributed to the favorable make-up of the Politburo, as many of Xi's allies were able to take over the vacated positions, and the PSC, as the reduced membership facilitated consensus decision making.²⁰³ In addition to early reform across the policy spectrum, Xi also developed and implemented a complex systems theory and mandated party cadre learn the theory which, not coincidentally, called for a strong central leader to oversee the system.²⁰⁴

Ironically, all this is happening at the expense of the system set up by Deng Xiaoping and consolidated until 2012, a system that was meant to better facilitate necessary reforms in the PRC. Indeed, the Chinese leadership seems to have bet that a system of more centralized control will lead to a better outcome than a system of collective leadership, a reversal of the attitude that pervaded the party at the start of the reform era in the 1970s.

²⁰³ Joseph Fewsmith, "Xi Jinping's Fast Start," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 41 (June 6, 2013): 1-7.

²⁰⁴ Lee, "An Institutional Analysis of Xi Jinping's Centralization of Power," 325-36.

They are not without their reasons. While collective leadership had facilitated many of the economic reforms in the latter half of the twentieth century, the perception among Chinese leaders was that the system had failed at a crucial juncture in the twenty-first. However, such a perception vastly underestimates the extent to which reform in the first decade of the twenty-first century was stalled by the strength of vested interests and the dramatic impact of the GFC. In short, Chinese leaders made a bad bet, betting against a system that they wrongly equated with failure, against a system that would have likely done more to help facilitate reform than to hinder it in the coming decade.

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IV. XI'S ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN: GENUINE REFORM OR POLITICAL TOOL?

A. INTRODUCTION

When he took the helm of the PRC and the CCP, Xi Jinping immediately began a sweeping anti-corruption campaign across the whole of the country. As a result, hundreds of thousands of officials have been arrested and prosecuted for crimes relating to corruption since the campaign first began in 2013. It is no coincidence that the campaign aligns with Xi's ascension to positions of power. Personally, Xi has a history and reputation as a leader unafraid to take on corruption in Chinese society, supporting anti-corruption campaigns in the various localities he presided over before taking the top job. Within the context of his position, Xi seems to have simply carried on leadership's tradition of beginning anti-corruption campaigns to tackle this endemic and long-lasting problem within the PRC.

Yet, to many, this particular assault seems different for two distinct reasons.²⁰⁵ First, Xi's anti-corruption campaign seems to be an expansion of the depth and focus of anti-corruption campaigns in the Reform Era. Far from rooting out corruption along the periphery and at lower levels of government, Xi's anti-corruption campaign has targeted what are referred to as "tigers"—individuals with high positions in the CCP and PRC—as well as "flies"—the smaller, corrupt players in the political-economic system.²⁰⁶ This line of thinking can be reduced to the following question: is Xi's anti-corruption campaign different from previous anti-corruption campaigns? Another argument suggests that Xi's anti-corruption campaign, as opposed to past campaigns, is politically motivated, primarily used to target Xi's political enemies instead of rooting out corruption on the whole. Indeed, Xi's assault on corruption has seen the downfall of many prominent Chinese officials, some of whom were believed to be Xi's political foes. This view can also be summarized with the following question: Is Xi's anti-corruption campaign being used to target his political

²⁰⁵ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 29-35.

²⁰⁶ Jon S T Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies*, no. 1 (2015): 1-98.

opponents? For those who would answer both these questions in the affirmative, another important question arises—is Xi using the anti-corruption campaign as a way to punish those who have challenged his centralization of power and cow those who may? Just as it is no coincidence that Xi is embarking on an anti-corruption campaign from both a personal and positional perspective, it may also be no coincidence that he is embarking on such a campaign while pushing through political reforms.

This chapter will seek to answer these questions, weighing evidence both for and against the first assertion—Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is unique in scope—and the second assertion—that Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is being used to target his political enemies—in order to come to a conclusion on if Xi is using the campaign to further his political program. Ultimately, the evidence suggest that both the initial assertions are true. Xi’s campaign is unique because of the focus Xi, the party, and the government have placed on it in recent years and Xi’s campaign is almost definitely being used to target his political opponents. However, crucially, Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is not unique because it is being used to target political opponents. On the contrary, there is a large history of anti-corruption campaigns being initiated by Chinese leaders to bring about the downfall of their political opponents. The difference is the legacy of politically motivated anti-corruption campaigns is now being coupled with an anti-corruption campaign of a scope, depth, and seriousness that has heretofore not been seen in Chinese politics. Clearly, Xi has begun a new type of campaign in China, an unprecedentedly massive and focused assault on corruption that simultaneously seeks to cleanse Chinese politics of this pervasive problem and purge the CCP and the PRC of Xi’s political opponents so that he can continue to centralize power in his own hands. This surprisingly is not inconsistent with the idea that the CCP backed Xi’s centralization of power. Many of the networks Xi has targeted have been completely detached from his own political networks, suggesting that while those who have been targeted may not have objected to the centralization of power as a concept, they objected to the centralization of power under Xi.

To truly understand why the anti-corruption campaign in PRC is a mechanism for Xi to centralize political power, both of the above assertions much be tested against the evidence. First, in order to ascertain if Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is any different from

those of his predecessors, his anti-corruption campaign must be put into the proper historical context by comparing it with previous anti-corruption campaigns during the Reform Period. Such a comparison will inevitably involve the length, the scope, the depth, and the methods of the anti-corruption campaign. Second, in order to ascertain if Xi's assault on corruption is actually being used to target his political opponents, the results of the campaign and the motivations for beginning it must be scrutinized. With respect to the former, it will be useful to examine if Xi's anti-corruption campaign is targeting officials based on factional, geographical, or policy lines; some combination thereof; or in no distinguishable pattern at all. With respect to the latter, Xi's personal experience with anti-corruption and the motivation behind other, previous anti-corruption campaigns must be addressed. Finally, to conclude, the efficacy of such an anti-corruption campaign will be examined, leading to a broader question of if Xi's campaign can ultimately be successful in reducing the amount of corruption within Chinese politics. Ultimately, such an achievement is doubtful, as Xi, for political reasons, seems content with targeting the symptoms of the corruption problem—the corruption officials themselves—rather than the source of the problem itself.

B. CORRUPTION IN CONTEXT

Anti-corruption campaigns have long been a feature of Chinese politics if only because corruption itself has long pervaded the Chinese political system. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, imperial officials were incentivized to engage in corrupt practices by their low salaries and limited oversight, with some Qing officials adding as much as fifty percent to the official tax quota in order to enrich themselves.²⁰⁷ The ensuing Republican Era also saw rampant corruption, especially under Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government. In fact, corruption was one of the primary reasons for the CCP's victory over Chiang and the KMT, as the local population despised a KMT regime that they viewed as primarily extractive and embraced a CCP that had earned a reputation for redistributing goods and

²⁰⁷ Loren Brandt, Debin Ma, and Thomas G. Rawski, "From Divergence to Convergence: Reevaluating the History behind China's Economic Boom," *Journal of Economic Literature* 52, no. 1 (March 2014): 45–123, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.52.1.45>.

foodstuffs.²⁰⁸ Therefore, when Mao and the CCP drove the KMT to Taiwan and took over China, they recognized the necessity of tackling corruption, especially after inheriting the bureaucracy of the KMT, in order to legitimize the CCP regime in the eyes of the Chinese people.²⁰⁹ Therefore, between 1949 and 1951, the CCP targeted roughly six-hundred and fifty people in their efforts to battle corruption, marking the first anti-corruption project in the PRC.²¹⁰ Ultimately, corruption under Mao remained a problem, but not a systemic one. Once the reform periods began, however, corruption ascended to an entirely new level.

While the massive economic reforms that began during the mid-1970s under Deng Xiaoping certainly brought substantial economic opportunity to the PRC, they also brought substantial opportunity for actors within this new political-economic system to engage in corruption. To some extent, the policies meant to move the PRC toward a market economy facilitated the growth of corruption. For example, the dual-track pricing system initiated early in the reform era easily allowed officials buy goods for one price and sell them for a profit at another. Such corruption was tacitly permitted as a way to compensate and reassure officials whose jobs were threatened by the new market economy. Additionally, allowing officials to take their share of their region's economic growth was seen as a way to incentivize economic growth in the region, the thinking being that officials would focus on growing their localities economy if they too could share in that growth.²¹¹ But as time has passed, Chinese leaders came to realize that corruption had increasingly become a genuine threat to the further pursuit of market-orientated reform. This is evident in the growth of corruption as a share of the Chinese economy. By some measurements, the average amount of yuan involved in a corruption case had had grown from 100,000 in the late 1970s to over several million by the late 1990s.²¹² With several hundred thousand

²⁰⁸ Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," 9-11.

²⁰⁹ Quah, 9-12.

²¹⁰ Xiaobo Lü, *Cadres and Corruption: The Organizational Involution of the Chinese Communist Party* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²¹¹ Kroeber, *China's Economy*, 206-207.

²¹² Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," 11-12.

corrupt officials operating throughout the country, losses due to corruption amounted to roughly 13.2% to 16.8% of the PRC's total GDP by the late 1990s.²¹³

As a result of this widespread corruption during the Reform Era, Chinese leaders began to see anti-corruption campaigns as a vehicle for them to address serious systemic problems while strengthening the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of the people. Starting in 1982, Chinese leaders began anti-corruption campaigns about every two years.²¹⁴ Ostensibly, these movements were meant to combat corruption within the Chinese political system. In reality, they served broader purposes, specifically to reinforce the status of the CCP as the country's legitimate ruling party, and were therefore curtailed in their ability to actually root out corruption within the Chinese political system. This was primarily due to the thin line Chinese leaders walked in their anti-corruption campaigns. On the one hand, if the CCP was viewed as too lenient on corruption, it could lose credibility in the eyes of the Chinese people. On the other hand, if the CCP came down too hard on corruption, it could simultaneously weaken the political system by causing defections from the party and lead to an impression among the populous, by virtue of the sheer number of cases a no-holds-barred anti-corruption campaign would bring, that the regime was hopelessly corrupt.²¹⁵ Therefore, Chinese anti-corruption campaigns developed into a routinized system in which the anti-corruption campaigns targeted a specific number of particularly egregious cases but failed to actually solve the problem. Between 1980 and 2000, Chinese officials investigated an average of 35,000 cases per year.²¹⁶ During the mid-2000s, that number jumped up to about 100,000 cases per year.²¹⁷

²¹³ Zheng Chang, "Understanding the Corruption Networks Revealed in the Current Chinese Anti-Corruption Campaign: A Social Network Approach," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (September 3, 2018): 735–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458060>.

²¹⁴ Macabe Keliher and Hsinchao Wu, "Corruption, Anticorruption, and the Transformation of Political Culture in Contemporary China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 1 (February 2016): 5–18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S002191181500203X>.

²¹⁵ Fu Hualing, "Wielding the Sword: President Xi's New Anti-Corruption Campaign," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, September 6, 2014), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2492407>.

²¹⁶ Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)" 215.

²¹⁷ Keliher and Wu, "Corruption, Anticorruption, and the Transformation of Political Culture in Contemporary China," 5-18.

It was not until Xi Jinping came to power during in 2012 that the routinized process of anti-corruption campaigns was actually replaced with a vigorous effort to actually stem corruption.

C. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE: XI'S ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN

On the surface, Xi's anti-corruption campaign can be viewed as just another iteration of the endless cycle of anti-corruption campaigns that have plagued Chinese politics since the start of the reform era. However, there are several factors that demonstrate that Xi's campaign is different from those that have come before it. Perhaps the most obvious one is the sheer amount of time that Xi's campaign has lasted. Rather than fading away after a year or two like previous campaigns, Xi's assault on corruption has had a unique staying power likely due to Xi's intense focus on the issue. From his inauguration in November 2012 as General Secretary of the Communist Party, when he signaled the start of the campaign by specifically mentioning corruption as part of the "many pressing problems within the Party that need to be resolved" (he did not specify any other problems), until the present day, Xi has unceasingly worked to make his anti-corruption campaign a hallmark of his time in office.²¹⁸ In addition to the amount of time Xi has spent on his anti-corruption campaign, four other factors distinguish his campaign from past ones: the size, the spread, the targets, and the methods.

In the first place, the sheer number of people being targeted in Xi's campaign certainly distinguishes it from many campaigns that have come before it. The anti-corruption efforts immediately preceding Xi's netted roughly 100,000 people per year between 2002 and 2007, for a total 518, 484 cadre who faced disciplinary action. Between 2013, Xi's first year in power, and the middle of 2018, Xi's anti-corruption campaign netted some two million individuals and only seems to be accelerating.²¹⁹ The campaign netted 172,000 people in 2013, 330,000 people in 2014, 527,000 people in 2017, and

²¹⁸ SCMP Reporters, "Transcript: Xi Jinping's Speech at the Unveiling of the New Chinese Leadership," *South China Morning Post*, November 15, 2012, <https://www.scmp.com/news/18th-party-congress/article/1083153/transcript-xi-jinpings-speech-unveiling-new-chinese>.

²¹⁹ "Visualizing China's Anti-Corruption Campaign."

302,000 people in the first half of 2018 alone.²²⁰ Clearly, the sheer numbers of Xi's effort distinguish the campaign from those that have come before it.

Xi's anti-corruption campaign is also distinguished from past campaigns by the people the campaign has targeted. Xi has famously claimed that his campaign will target both tiger and flies, unlike past campaigns which avoided targeting high-ranking officials. Xi has been true to his word. The number of officials at the deputy-ministerial rank or above who were disciplined as a result of the anti-corruption campaign increased more than fourfold during the term of the Eighteen Party Congress (2013-2017) when compared to the average number of officials of similar rank disciplined during the previous four party congresses.²²¹ Looking at the highest echelons of political power in the CCP, twenty-one Central Committee members (both former and current) were disciplined for corruption, two-times more than the ten Central Committee members disciplined during the previous four Party Congresses combined.²²² Nor has Xi's campaign been confined to civilian party members. Unlike previous, anti-corruption campaigns, Xi has also targeted high-ranking brass in the PLA, targeting two former deputy chairmen of the CMC and two more members of the CMC who were serving on the body when they were removed.²²³

The expansion of the scope of anti-corruption efforts under Xi in and of itself distinguishes it from previous campaigns which had adhered to an unwritten rule concerning who could be targeted. Up until Xi, anti-corruption efforts generally adhered to the rule that PSC members, serving or retired, were exempt from prosecution. Additionally, the rule extended to immediate families of these PSC members.²²⁴ However, in 2014, one of the members of the cohort of Central Committee member during disciplined during Eighteenth Party Congress was Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the PSC,

²²⁰ "Visualizing China's Anti-Corruption Campaign."

²²¹ Zheng Chang, "Understanding the Corruption Networks Revealed in the Current Chinese Anti-Corruption Campaign: A Social Network Approach," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (September 3, 2018): 735–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458060>.

²²² Li Ling, "Politics of Anticorruption in China: Paradigm Change of the Party's Disciplinary Regime 2012–2017," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (January 2, 2019): 47-63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1497911>.

²²³ Li, 47-63.

²²⁴ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 105-110.

marking the first time a member of the highest-ranking body in the CCP was disciplined as part of anti-corruption drive.²²⁵ By targeting Zhou Yongkang, Xi undid this unwritten agreement. To do so, he had to overcome the reservations of many party elders, including Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, meaning that Xi had acquired enough power within the party to override a rule that would put the highest-ranking members of the CCP at risk.²²⁶

Finally, Xi's anti-corruption campaign is different because it not only aims to sanction those who have engaged in corrupt activities, but it also aims to change the culture and behavior of CCP officials. To that end, Xi issued an eight-point regulation detailing new rules aimed to curtail the benefits that many CCP officials had enjoyed as a result of their political positions.²²⁷ These regulations specifically targeted official banquets, foreign travel, and official cars, aspects of Chinese officialdom that have been used to signal one's status and power within the political system.²²⁸ Although not strictly indicative of corrupt behavior, such actions are easily construed as such in the public eye. This fact almost certainly prompted the new regulations, as a large goal of Xi's anti-corruption campaign, like those of the past, is to shore up public support for the CCP. According to some, Xi's efforts to reform the culture of officialdom seem to be what distinguishes his anti-corruption campaign from previous anti-corruption struggles.²²⁹ Regardless of how one defines it, Xi's decision to reform corrupt behavior and his decision to expand the size and scope of his anti-corruption campaign certainly suggest something new is afoot in the PRC.

D. WHY THE DIFFERENCE: THE MOTIVATIONS AND GOALS OF XI'S ASSAULT ON CORRUPTION

Having established that Xi's assault on corruption is different in length, scope, and content when compared to other anti-corruption efforts in the Reform Era, I will now turn

²²⁵ Li, "Politics of Anticorruption in China," 47-63.

²²⁶ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 105-110.

²²⁷ Xinhua, "Eight-Point Regulation," December 4, 2012, http://cpcchina.chinadaily.com.cn/2012-12/05/content_15992256.htm.

²²⁸ Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," 44.

²²⁹ Quah, 40.

to the question of if the motivations for this particular campaign are any different from those of the past. To answer this question, I turn to two separate factors—Xi’s history as a CCP official and the historical pattern of previous anti-corruption campaigns. Xi’s history as a cadre is defined by notable anti-corruption activities in the localities over which he governed prior to taking the CCP’s top job, suggesting the current assault is indeed a genuine attempt to root out corruption in the CCP. Yet, when the campaign itself is put into context with other Reform Era anti-corruption corruption efforts, it becomes obvious that this is not Xi’s real intent. The fact of the matter is that all significant anti-corruption efforts in the PRC have had a political motivation and there is no reason to think Xi’s is any different. The evidence testifies to this fact; Xi’s campaign seems to follow clear patterns, targeting networks of cadre who have worked together in the past and formed power bases outside Xi’s own. Ultimately, it seems that Xi has leveraged his reputation as a graft buster and incorruptible official to begin a sweeping takedown of his political enemies in the guise of an anti-corruption campaign.

1. A Sterling Reputation: Xi’s Personal Commitment to Anti-corruption

Like most CCP leaders today, Xi worked his way up the organizational ladder, developing a strong reputation for a graft buster along the way. This reputation mainly developed after Xi’s stint as Party Secretary in the Ningde District of Fujian Province. In 1988, at age thirty-five, Xi was sent to Ningde, a poverty-stricken district with a population of about three million and a per capita income of about one-hundred and sixty renminbi.²³⁰ Upon arriving in Ningde, he found that more than 7,300 cadre had built small villas (constructing a house is a significant life achievement in this area) on farmland appropriated from the district’s residents.²³¹ Additionally, the cost of the villas was well over the salaries of the cadre in the district. One villa was estimated to have cost RMB100,000, an exorbitant sum for an official serving in such an impoverish district, suggesting that this villa, and many like it, had been constructed with ill-gotten gains.²³²

²³⁰ Quah, 21-22.

²³¹ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 105-110.

²³² Quah, “Hunting the Corrupt ‘Tigers’ and ‘Flies’ in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping’s Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015),” 21-22.

While the local party committee had investigated the problem on three separate occasions, it was not until Xi arrived that anything was actually done about it. Xi immediately went to work to crackdown on the corrupt cadre in Ningde by demolishing the villas themselves and placing their owners under investigation.²³³ When the locals responded positively to Xi's initiatives, the press began to take notice. Zhang Mingqing, the provincial head of the People's Daily, published an article about Xi's efforts entitled "Wining the Hearts of Ten Thousand People Through Doing a Good Deed," which was circulated across the country, giving Xi a national reputation as a graft buster.²³⁴

Xi's reputation not only as a graft buster but also as a clean official was further reinforced by his subsequent positions Deputy-Party Secretary of Fujian and as Party Secretary of Shanghai. In his position as the former from 1995 to 2002, Xi involved with the corruption investigation into Lai Changxing, a businessman from the city of Xiamen, who reported made fifty million RMB through corrupt activities.²³⁵ Xi, using his sterling reputation, was able to bring back a sense normalcy after the investigation results in the takedown of Lai's network, which included government and party officials, and in the resignation of the Fujian Party Secretary.²³⁶ Years later, in March of 2007, Xi performed a similar feat in Shanghai in the aftermath of the sacking of Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu. Chen, along with his political network, was brought down in a massive corruption probe that involved many of the city's officials and several million RMB.²³⁷ Moving into the city to replace his disgraced predecessors, Xi was tasked with cleaning up the city and rebuilding the legitimacy of the party.²³⁸ To do so, Xi reportedly instituted new rules in Shanghai that required CCP cadre within the city to report their assets in an effort to

²³³ Quah, 21-22.

²³⁴ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 105-110.

²³⁵ Lam, 105-110.

²³⁶ Lam, 105-110.

²³⁷ Cheng Li, "Was the Shanghai Gang Shanghaied? The Fall of Chen Liangyu and the Survival of Jiang Zemin's Faction," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 20 (February 28, 2007): 1-17.

²³⁸ Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," 22-23.

increase financial transparency.²³⁹ Clearly, Xi reputation as an incorruptible politician who is tough on corruption was only furthered by his assignments in Fujian and Shanghai and it seems to be the case that his reputation was at least a factor in his ability to obtain those positions in the first place.

Although Xi has been painted as a tough, incorruptible figure, that may simply be the image he has worked hard to cultivate. In actuality, the truth may be a bit more complicated. Contrary to his image as an honest official, Xi's extended family has grown wealthy as Xi has risen in the ranks of CCP, coming into millions of dollars' worth of financial assets over the course of Xi's career.²⁴⁰ While none of the assets have been traced direct to Xi or his immediate family, the ability of Xi's family (or the family of any CCP officials for that matter) to grow wealthy while their relatives rise in rank and power certainly raises questions of how clean incorruptible officials actually are. The timing of Xi's various positions also raises questions concerning what he knew and when he knew it. Although Xi worked hard to clean up after the Lai Changxing scandal, his long history in Fujian suggests that he likely knew what had been going on for quite some time.²⁴¹ Nor was the Lai Changxing the only corruption scandal that took place in Fujian while Xi was there. The series of corruption scandals that occurred in Fujian during his seventeen-year tenure there may not implicate Xi, but they certainly call into question his pristine image of an official ready and willing to tackle corruption wherever he sees it.²⁴²

All that being said, there may be at least some truth to Xi's personal commitment to corruption outside of his history and image as a graft buster. Significantly, Xi has continued the anti-corruption campaign even in the face of evidence that the campaign may be doing more harm than good to the image of the CCP. There has always been a worry that exposing and tackling corruption within the country could actually turn the populous

²³⁹ Zheng Yongnian and Chen Gang, "Xi Jinping's Rise and Political Implications," *China: An International Journal* 7, no. 1 (March 19, 2009): 1–30.

²⁴⁰ Neil Western, Ben Richardson, and Peter Hirschberg, "Xi Jinping Millionaire Relations Reveal Fortunes of Elite," *Bloomberg*, June 29, 2012, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-06-29/xi-jinping-millionaire-relations-reveal-fortunes-of-elite>.

²⁴¹ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 105-110.

²⁴² Lam, 105-110.

against the CCP, as highlighting the successes of an anti-corruption campaign also paradoxically highlights just how much corruption actually exists in the country. It seems, at least to some extent, that is what is actually happening. One recent survey suggests that the number of corruption cases in a province is inversely correlated with the perception of the level of corruption in the central government.²⁴³ In other words, many Chinese have begun to blame the central government for the problem of corruption within their own localities. Despite the danger that this poses to the CCP, Xi has persevered in his campaign against corruption within the country, suggesting that his commitment truly lies in rooting out corruption within the country.

2. It's Always Political: The Political Legacy of Anti-corruption

While there may be substantial evidence in Xi's past and current conduct that suggests his main motivation for beginning this new, sweeping anti-corruption campaign is to actually root out corruption, the historical legacies of anti-corruption campaigns in China tell a different story. While anti-corruption campaigns have always been a hallmark of the Chinese political sphere, so has, it would seem, the tendency to use these campaigns to undermine political opponents by directly implicating them in corruption scandals or implicating the opponent's political allies.²⁴⁴ The fact is that most (if not all) officials in the CCP have at one point or another been involved in corrupt dealings. Therefore, whenever charges of corruption come up, they are likely to stick, making anti-corruption efforts a potent political weapon for any Chinese leaders who feels the need to consolidate power. This is exactly what happened in two previous anti-corruption struggles, one by Jiang Zemin and another by Hu Jintao.

a. Chen Xitong

In 1993, Jiang Zemin began an anti-corruption campaign ostensibly to respond to reports that corruption was spreading at an alarming rate in the wake of the reboot of

²⁴³ Hudson Lockett, "China Anti-Corruption Campaign Backfires," *Financial Times*, October 9, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/02f712b4-8ab8-11e6-8aa5-f79f5696c731>.

²⁴⁴ Fewsmith, "Chinese Politics since Tiananmen," 468-527.

economic reforms.²⁴⁵ Like all anti-corruption campaigns in the PRC, the campaign initially only targeted the “flies” but, as the campaign dragged on and the operation began to bag “tigers,” it became clear that the motivations behind this campaign were not purely to clean up the political system. To put the moment into context, the anti-corruption campaign was begun in the midst of a concerted effort by Jiang Zemin to solidify his power within the CCP. In 1994, the Fourth Plenum of the Fourteenth Party Congress had just bestowed the title of “core” leader on Jiang.²⁴⁶ While he was solidifying his position, he still had to overcome other nodes of power within the CCP. Therefore, it is not surprising that, by the beginning of 1995, the anti-corruption campaign had set its sights on high-ranking Chen Xitong, the Beijing Party Secretary, and the cadre who surrounded him, individuals who, by virtue of their support from party elders like Deng Xiaoping, represented a threat to Jiang’s authority.²⁴⁷

Like all operations to take down “tigers” in the Chinese political system, anti-corruption officials targeted the individuals surrounding Chen first. In February and March of 1995, anti-corruption officials rounded up roughly sixty CCP cadre based in Beijing, including the secretaries of both Chen the Beijing’s Mayor Li Qiyuan.²⁴⁸ In April, after the suicide of Beijing’s Vice-Mayor Wang Baosen gave Jiang the pretext to intensify the campaign, Chen himself was placed under investigation. Chen was simultaneously removed from his position as Beijing Party Secretary and, in September of 1995, he was officially removed from the Politburo.²⁴⁹ Ultimately, Chen was sentenced to sixteen years in prison for accepting RMB550, 000 in bribes and for using public funds to build luxury villas, becoming the highest-ranking official to be brought down on corruption charges up

²⁴⁵ Fewsmith, 468-527.

²⁴⁶ Fewsmith, 468-527.

²⁴⁷ Quah, “Hunting the Corrupt ‘Tigers’ and ‘Flies’ in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping’s Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015),” 75-77.

²⁴⁸ Fewsmith, “Chinese Politics since Tiananmen,” 468-527.

²⁴⁹ Fewsmith, 468-527.

to that point in Chinese political history.²⁵⁰ Until his death, Chen maintained that corruption charges brought against him were manufactured and that he was ultimately the victim of a power CCP power struggle.²⁵¹

b. *Chen Liangyu*

Despite the fact that there were certainly other corrupt cadre who equaled Chen's rank in the CCP, another "tiger" of his rank was not brought down until Hu Jintao targeted Chen Liangyu in 2006.²⁵² Like Jiang campaign before him, Hu brought down Chen by targeting those around him before finally moving on Chen himself. Six other senior officials in Shanghai were targeted before authorities focused on Chen, including Zhu Junyi, director of Shanghai's Labor and Social Security Bureau, and Qin Yu, Chen's own personal assistant.²⁵³ In September of 2006, Chen himself was arrested and charged with, among other financial misdeeds, siphoning off 3.5 billion yuan from Shanghai's pension fund.²⁵⁴ In 2008, Chen was sentenced to eighteen years in prison and stripped of his offices in Shanghai and his membership in the Politburo.²⁵⁵

Echoing Jiang's anti-corruption campaign against Chen Xitong and the Beijing clique, it is no coincidence that Hu's campaign against Chen Liangyu and the Shanghai clique occurred during the lead up to the leadership transition of the Seventeenth Party Congress. Chen himself had been a strong, vocal opponent of Hu's macroeconomic policies and therefore represented a challenge to Hu's leadership during this important

²⁵⁰ SCMP Reporters, "June 4 Crackdown Mastermind Chen Xitong Dies," *South China Morning Post*, June 4, 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1253554/june-4-crackdown-mastermind-chen-xitong-dies>; SCMP Reporters, "Jiang behind My Downfall, Chen Suggests," *South China Morning Post*, May 29, 2012, <https://www.scmp.com/article/1002292/jiang-behind-my-downfall-chen-suggests>.

²⁵¹ SCMP Reporters, "Jiang behind My Downfall, Chen Suggests."

²⁵² Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," 77-78.

²⁵³ Li, "Was the Shanghai Gang Shanghaied? The Fall of Chen Liangyu and the Survival of Jiang Zemin's Faction," 1-17.

²⁵⁴ Li, 1-17.

²⁵⁵ David Barboza, "Former Party Boss in China Gets 18 Years," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/12/world/asia/12shanghai.html>.

period.²⁵⁶ Additionally, the Shanghai clique, of which Chen was a member and Hu's predecessor Jiang Zemin is the leader, had limited Hu's ability to solidify power. Before leaving office, Jiang had ensured members of the Shanghai clique maintained several positions on the Politburo and the PSCs, boxing Hu in politically.²⁵⁷ However, with the Seventeenth Party Congress nearing, Chen's fall was likely a signal that Hu planned to stack both the Politburo and the PSC with his own allies, at the first opportunity he had to do so.²⁵⁸

c. Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang

There are eerily parallels between the cases of Chen Xitong and Chen Liangyu and the cases of two "tigers" who fell under Xi—Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang. To be fair, Bo fell while Hu was still in power but only mere months before Xi was elected General Secretary, making it inconceivable that Xi did not have something to do with Bo's fall. The timing of Bo's fall actually reinforces the similarities between all four cases. Just like the Chen Xitong and Chen Liangyu, both Bo and Zhou fell during crucial leadership transitions, Bo while Xi was taking power and Zhou while Xi was solidifying it. Additionally, both Bo and Zhou represented threats to Xi's power, Bo for attempting to establish what has been characterized as a fiefdom in Chongqing while almost openly campaigning for the positions Xi currently occupies and Zhou for his close relationship with Bo and therefore his displeasure with the leadership of the Eighteenth Party Congress.²⁵⁹ In addition to these two major similarities, the method of investigating those who surround the "tiger" before investing the "tiger" himself, the lengthy prison terms and removals from office (which essentially amount to purge), and the efforts to neutralize these rival power nodes are common throughout all four cases. Ultimately, Xi's anti-corruption campaign has followed a largely established political pattern and an exact

²⁵⁶ Li, "Was the Shanghai Gang Shanghaied? The Fall of Chen Liangyu and the Survival of Jiang Zemin's Faction," 1-17.

²⁵⁷ Li, 1-17.

²⁵⁸ Li, 1-17.

²⁵⁹ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 105-110.

methodology when it comes to using anti-corruption campaigns to remove political rivals.²⁶⁰

d. Other Patterns

While the historical context certainly paints eerie parallels between Xi's anti-corruption campaign and those of the past, demonstrating historical continuities does not in and of itself prove that Xi's anti-corruption campaign is politically motivated. But looking at the vast amounts of data available (given that there have been so many "occurrences") has yielded substantial opportunity to look for statistical patterns in those who have been investigated for corruption. A cursory glance immediately demonstrates some distinct patterns. Aside from the officials surrounding Zhou Yongkang who have been investigated and charged, networks of officials targeted in the corruption campaign can be observed in the province of Shanxi, in a network centered around former President Hu Jintao's top aide Ling Jihua; in the province of Yunnan, a network centered on the former provincial party secretary Bai Enpei; in Jiangxi, in a network centered on former CPPCC vice-chairman Su Rong; and in Guangdong, in a network centered on former Guangzhou Party Secretary Wang Qingliang.²⁶¹ Diving deeper into the data supports these cursory glances, as a member of a "big-tiger faction" (the big tigers being Zhou, Ling, and Su) is more likely to be targeted in a new anti-corruption probe as opposed to an official who is not a part of these networks.²⁶²

Stepping back from a purely network analysis yields substantial patterns based on factional affiliation. Here, it is important to define what is meant by factional affiliation. When one defines factional affiliation with a group at large—the CCYL faction or the

²⁶⁰ Alice Lyman Miller, "The Bo Xilai Affair in Central Leadership Politics," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 38 (August 6, 2012), <https://www.hoover.org/research/bo-xilai-affair-central-leadership-politics>.

²⁶¹ Patrick Boehler and Feng Wang, "Tigers and Flies: How Two Years of Graft Probes Have Shaken China's Political Elite," *South China Morning Post*, November 3, 2014, <http://multimedia.scmp.com/china-corruption/>.

²⁶² Xi Lu, "Essays in China's Anti-Corruption Campaign" (UC Berkeley, 2017), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16g527r2>.Lu; Peter L. Lorentzen and Xi Lu, "Personal Ties, Meritocracy, and China's Anti-Corruption Campaign," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 21, 2018), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2835841>.

princeling faction for example—there is no significant correlation between membership in a certain faction and targeting or shielding in Xi’s anti-corruption probe.²⁶³ However, when factional affiliation is defined as individual connections, specifically connections related to birthplace, school affiliation, and work affiliations, such affiliations do matter in the anti-corruption campaign. According to one study, officials with birthplace and educational connections to incumbent PSC members are less likely to be investigated for corruption.²⁶⁴ Crucially, such shielding applies only to those with connection to incumbent members of the PSC; officials with connections to retired members of the PSC do not receive any similar protection.²⁶⁵ According to another study, not even officials with ties to current Politburo members are shielded; only those with birthplace and workplace connections to Xi Jinping himself receive any protection from the anti-corruption campaign.²⁶⁶ The difference between the two studies, in the scope of protection and the types of connections that provide protection, is likely due to the different samples the authors’ analyzed. However, the central point from both analyses remains clear—at a minimum, individuals with personal connections to Xi Jinping have been largely protected throughout his anti-corruption campaign.

What this ultimately demonstrates is that Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is a political tool. Despite his reputation as a genuine graft buster, the patterns in Xi’s campaign are unmistakable. He has followed the procedures of past, politically-motivated anti-corruption efforts to the letter. He has also investigated so many officials as part of his anti-corruption campaign that robust statistical analysis can now be conducted, analysis which suggests the campaign has targeted groups of officials surrounding certain high-profile individuals and avoided officials with personal connections to Xi. Ultimately, such a pattern suggests that Xi, in accordance with the trend outlined in chapter II of this thesis, is once again personalizing politics in the PRC. Factions do seem to be forming, but not along

²⁶³ Lu, “Essays in China’s Anti-Corruption Campaign.”

²⁶⁴ Zeng Qingjie and Yang Yujeong, “Informal Networks as Safety Nets: The Role of Personal Ties in China’s Anti-Corruption Campaign,” *China: An International Journal* 15, no. 3 (September 6, 2017): 26–57.

²⁶⁵ Qingjie and Yujeong, 26-27.

²⁶⁶ Lorentzen and Lu, “Personal Ties, Meritocracy, and China’s Anti-Corruption Campaign.”

the lines traditionally prescribed. Instead, the factions made clear as a result of the anti-corruption campaign revolve around individual connections.

E. CONCLUSION: ANTI-CORRUPTION OBSCURES GREATER ISSUES

Xi's anti-corruption campaign is undoubtedly exceptional in its length, its scope, and its depth. Indeed, the campaign has lasted longer, has targeted more officials, and has targeted officials that were previously protected by informal party norms. What is not exceptional is Xi's use of his anti-corruption campaign as a political tool. Both of Xi's predecessors—Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao—utilized anti-corruption campaigns in this manner during their terms, and it is clear that Xi is doing the same with his campaign. However, combining both these facts suggests that Xi is engaging in an unprecedented effort to eliminate political opposition to his efforts to centralize political power in the PRC. Crucially these networks are personal, not ideological or factional, suggesting that Xi's targets may simply object to Xi personally, not the centralization of power as a policy. Whatever the case, it is clear Xi does have political enemies, nodes of power throughout the PRC that could oppose his efforts, but he has skillfully used his anti-corruption campaign to silence them.

Ultimately, political maneuvering is but one of the very distinct reasons to begin an anti-corruption campaign in the PRC. As mentioned, such campaigns are often utilized as political tools to purge members of the party who would challenge the current leaders. In Xi's case, he seems to be targeting networks of individuals who would stand in the way of his effort to remake the Chinese political system. Anti-corruption efforts are also used to legitimize the party in the eyes of the people, demonstrating the CCP's commitment to tackling the problem of corruption. Again, in the case of Xi's campaign, the anti-corruption effort is likely a move to shore up public support for the CCP as the party reinforces its positions as the legitimate rulers of the PRC. Ironically, anti-corruption efforts in the PRC are not actually used to fight corruption, and Xi's campaign itself, while certainly rooting out corrupt individuals, is no exception.

The reason for this irony has been hinted at throughout this chapter: corruption in the PRC is simply too massive and widespread to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis,

even when the number of those cases reaches more than two million. Serious anti-corruption campaigns will require substantial changes to the Chinese political-economic system. On the economic side, this means ridding the system of opportunities for corruption by changing the state's role in the economy from a commander to a regulator. On the political side, this will require an independent legal and law-enforcement system, a substantial expansion of the press freedoms, and a radical change in the political culture. And if Xi is truly using his anti-corruption campaign to strengthen to CCP's control of society before embarking on these massive reforms, as some have suggested, he us unlikely to succeed.²⁶⁷

In the end, it is doubtful the party will embark on these reforms because they would undermine the very system that sustains the party. For better or for worse, corruption may serve as an adhesive that binds the many levels of cadre together. Because cadre at different levels benefit from the corruption that the CCP allows, all cadre are invested in continuing the CCP's rule. True anti-corruption measures would undermine this fragile balance require a crackdown on the highest levels of the CCP leadership, a move no one seems willing to make. Therefore, the CCP will continue to take half-hearted measures at combatting corruption in a way that both deals with the problem enough to demonstrate to the public that it is being dealt with and yields an effective weapon for the current regime to wield against political opponents

²⁶⁷ Kerry Brown, "The Anti-Corruption Struggle in Xi Jinping's China: An Alternative Political Narrative," *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1416008>.

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V. XI'S PLAN: THE RIGHT PATH FORWARD?

A. XI'S PLAN: HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

At the NPC in March of 2018, it became obvious, even to those who were not looking, that Xi Jinping had a plan. At that congress, delegates voted overwhelmingly to abolish presidential term limits, removing the legal constraints on Xi's time in office. However, even more significantly was Xi's decision not to nominate a successor to his office of General Secretary of the CCP, breaking with decades of tradition and paving the way for Xi to remain in office for a third term. Such actions, upon close inspection, are part of a pattern of political reform, one initiated by Xi that is meant to centralize power in Chinese society on the CCP and centralize power within the CCP on Xi himself. Therefore, the question is how was Xi able to centralize political power in himself with so little obvious opposition using reforms in direct conflict with the system of collective leadership that was being institutionalized when he took office?

To answer this question, I first looked for evidence that Xi was indeed centralizing power on himself within the PRC. In chapter II, I found that since Xi Jinping's ascension to power during the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012, Chinese politics has undoubtedly witnessed a definite shift in the political currents. By changing the Chinese political system from one of institutional politics, in which to rules and norms determine who holds political power, to a system of personal politics, in which proximity to individuals and political networks determine the holders of political power, Xi has centralized political power in the PRC and the CCP on himself. In other words, the pendulum that has come to define many aspects of Chinese politics has begun swinging away from institutional politics and toward personal politics, marking a definitive break with institutional politics but not necessarily a complete reversion to personal politics.

The most obvious symptom of that change has been the abolition of term limits on the Chinese presidency, which, in conjunction with Xi's decision not to appoint a successor for the position of General Secretary of the CCP, suggests Xi intends to rule well past the norm of ten years. In addition to this action, Xi has moved to consolidate his decision-

making power by surrounding himself with allies in the PSC and the Politburo and by taking control of an unprecedented number of leading small groups. His political strength is only buttressed by his popularity among the actual Chinese populous, a symptom of a deliberate effort to build a unique cult of personality around Xi and to permanently enshrine his contributions to CCP thought in the CCP's party constitution. Even more importantly than his relationship to the Chinese people is his relationship to the PLA. As part of his reform packages, Xi has brought massive reforms to the PLA itself, streamlining the decision-making within the PLA as a whole and the CMC in particular and therefore, whether inadvertently or by design, centralizing military power within his own hands. Clearly, Xi's era represents a change with the past, one in which rules and norms have become less important than a leader who can accomplish the difficult changes that need to come to the PRC.

That being said, those who view the Xi era of Chinese politics as a return to the Maoist era may be over exaggerating the changes actually taking place within Chinese politics. In the first place, the norm of retirement age has, to date, remained robust and effective. Turnover at the Nineteenth Party Congress saw the retirement of those CCP leaders in the Politburo who had reached age sixty-eight or holder during the previous term.²⁶⁸ The crucial test for this norm, however, will come at the Twentieth Party Congress in 2020, at which time Xi Jinping himself will be expected to retire in accordance with the norm. Still, the heretofore adherence to the norm of retirement age is not the only indication that Chinese politics has not returned to the Maoist era. While Xi has certainly developed a cult of personality like Mao, the content of the cults themselves are not the same. While Mao sought to portray himself as above all others, Xi seeks to present himself as a common man, humanizing not deifying himself in the eyes of the people. In summation, Xi Jinping has certainly brought about a new era of politics in China, moving the pendulum back toward the personal politics of the Mao era and away from the institutional politics pushed by Deng Xiaoping.

²⁶⁸ Alice Lyman Miller, "The 19th Central Committee Politburo," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 55 (January 23, 2018), <https://www.hoover.org/research/19th-central-committee-politburo>.

After firmly establishing that Chinese politics is undergoing a definitive shift, I analyzed two explanations for this shift. In chapter III, I evaluated if Xi was centralizing political power as a result of a party consensus to do just that. I found that Xi Jinping began his first term of General Secretary of the CCP, President of the PRC, and Chairman of the CMC with a clear mandate: bring the necessary economic reforms to the PRC and do so quickly. This seems to have grown out of the sense of frustration with Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, who was unable to fulfill the promises of economic reform he made in his first term, especially after the GFC of 2007 and 2008. To Chinese leaders, the blame for this failure rested at the feet of Hu and the political system he oversaw. Hu himself has been portrayed as an overly cautious leader, one lacking the political gravitas to enact the tough reforms necessary to keep the PRC's trajectory of upward economic growth. As such, Chinese leaders also indicted the system of collective leadership that came to fruition under Hu, calling for institutional reforms that would centralize power within the political system, an idea that likely originated in the perceived success of the relatively centralized economic system of the PRC in weathering the GFC. Eventually, during the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012, these institutional and attitudinal changes were manifested in both the shrinking of the size of the PSC and the statements, some by Hu himself, about the necessity of an effective, centralized leadership. As a result, Xi received *carte blanche* to begin that very process of centralizing political power. Ironically, the GFC itself and the Chinese response to it seems to have inhibited Hu's ability to enact reform more than either Hu's weak leadership or the system of collective leadership itself, raising the important question of if the response of Chinese leaders was actually the correct one.

In chapter IV, I analyzed a second explanation—Xi's anti-corruption campaign. I evaluated if Xi was truly leveraging his anti-corruption campaign as a political tool in order to push his political agenda. I found that, to deal with opposition to his political program, Xi began a politically-motivated anti-corruption campaign, targeting members of networks that opposed his centralization policies. Indeed, members in networks surrounding CCP tigers—high-ranking members of the CCP—are more likely to be investigated than those

who are not members. ²⁶⁹ That being said, the political use of anti-corruption efforts is not unique to Xi; both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao used them to purge their major political rivals while consolidating political power. ²⁷⁰ While Xi has undoubtedly followed the tradition of his predecessors, Xi's own anti-corruption campaign can be distinguished by its sheer length, scope, and depth. To date, Xi's anti-corruption campaign has lasted longer and brought in more people than any campaign that has come before. Xi also seems unrestricted by an unwritten rule concerning targets of anti-corruption campaigns, as he has shown no qualms in taking down former PSC committee members, their families, and their associates. Accordingly, he has disciplined four times as many tigers during the term of the Eighteenth Party Congress than the number of tigers disciplined during the last four party congresses combined. ²⁷¹

It seems counter-intuitive that Xi would have to initiate an anti-corruption campaign in order to push policies that have been blessed by the CCP as a whole, but the two are easily reconcilable in the context of a party with many different power bases. While the party is often portrayed as a monolithic block, competing networks of individuals often emerge as a result of educational and professional experiences. While it is unclear that those networks not in Xi's orbit opposed his centralization of power on ideological grounds, it is easy to see how they would see such a centralization as a political threat to their own power base. Therefore, while party members seemed to have accepted the necessity of centralizing power in a single strong figure, they likely did not agree on who that figure should be. Nevertheless, Xi pushed ahead with political and economic reform almost immediately, but this centralization of power in Xi's hands undoubtedly drew the ire of those who were not within Xi's political networks. Those alternative networks seem to have been the main targets of Xi's anti-corruption campaign.

²⁶⁹ Lu, "Essays in China's Anti-Corruption Campaign."

²⁷⁰ Quah, "Hunting the Corrupt 'Tigers' and 'Flies' in China: An Evaluation of Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 2012 to March 2015)," 75-81.

²⁷¹ Chang, "Understanding the Corruption Networks Revealed in the Current Chinese Anti-Corruption Campaign," 735-47.

In the end, Xi's mandate to centralize power in the Chinese political system was likely the most important factor in his rise to power in the Chinese political system as he could not have embarked on such massive reform without the blessing of the party nor could he have done so in the context of a party deeply opposed to such reform without serious backlash. The anti-corruption campaign, within a political context, seems to have been an additional method by which Xi has consolidated power, a supplement to the process but not enough on its own. However, these two factors combined have paved the way for dramatic changes in Chinese politics. As mentioned before, it is doubtful that Xi will completely resurrect the politics of the Mao era, and even more doubtful that he wants to. Xi, having seen his father purged and having come of age during the Cultural Revolution, likely possesses no desire to see himself become the next Mao, invested with complete political power. Instead, his goal seems much broader—the strengthening not of himself but of the PRC as a whole.

B. CATCH 22: THE CHINESE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC DILEMMA

After more than forty years of political and economic reform, the PRC and the CCP are at a crossroads. For the first time since the reform period began, economic reform may be challenging the CCP's hold on political power. Economically, the CCP must begin difficult economic reforms that would dramatically change the political-economic system within the country in order to follow the economic path of other advanced economies and continue to grow the country. However, politically, that path will, at the very least, undermine the economic levers that the CCP views as central to protecting the economy and could, at the other extreme, undermine the CCP's hold on power in the PRC. Against this backdrop of growing domestic uncertainty, the PRC's rise as a major source of global and economic power has garnered the attention of the world's major powerholders, most notably the United States, many of which increasingly see the PRC as a growing threat to the world order. This situation is not lost on CCP, who are acutely aware of the difficult choices ahead, nor has it escaped the attention of the CCP's most important leader, Xi Jinping. In fact, Xi's actions, when viewed through the context of this uncertain political-economic period, appear to be guided by this dilemma.

Xi's political program seeks to centralize political power in the PRC in the CCP and centralize political power within the CCP in himself. He has broken with several rules and norms developed over the past forty years of the reform period to do so and seems to have been largely successful in initiating this political change. In order to do so, Xi drew upon the ubiquitous feeling of dissatisfaction with the pace of reform throughout the party in order to unite the CCP behind his political program of power centralization. He utilized a massive anti-corruption campaign to pressure or eliminate important members of the party and their underlings who, through their separate power bases, could challenge this political program. Ultimately, Xi's answer to the Chinese political-economic dilemma has been a shift in the political system from institutional politics to personal politics. But why has he decided to make this decision? And will it ultimately work?

The remainder of this chapter will seek to answer those pressing questions, questions which will be significant to individuals in the governments, the militaries, the multi-national organizations, and the countries well outside the CCP and the PRC. First, I will attempt to evaluate why Xi embarked on this particular political program, endeavoring to make sense of Xi's and the CCP's actions in the context of the political-economic dilemma facing the PRC today. Then, I will attempt to answer the question of if this effort will work, drawing upon political and economic analysis to make a candid assessment about the possibilities of Chinese success. In conclusion, I will reflect on what the CCP's and the PRC's success in this endeavor will mean for the country and for the rest of the world and, alternatively, what their failure will mean for the Chinese people and the people of the world.

C. XI'S PLAN: WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

There is a persistent narrative in Western media to portray Xi Jinping's power centralization as a play for power, with political power being both the means and the ends of Xi's political changes. However, such a narrative ignores the process by which Xi centralized political power in the first place. He could not have done so without the acquiescence of many within the CCP, and CCP leaders would not have acquiesced unless they viewed a pressing need for power centralization. In accordance with this analysis,

there is no doubt that they saw power centralization as a means to achieve pressing economic reform. Therefore, Xi's mandate to centralize political power in China seems to have only come along with the mandate to continue to push economic reform. That being said, to view Xi's political program as a means to achieving a more balanced economy misses the intricate connections between economics, politics, and society within the PRC. Xi's political reforms surely grew out of a pressing need for economic reforms, but those economic reforms are pressing because the CCP views them as a key for their continued rule of the PRC.

What makes Xi's mandate to pursue economic reform important is the fact that the PRC has reached a crucial phase of its economic development, one that could decide the economic trajectory of the country for years to come. The PRC can continue its economic growth by shifting its growth model—from government spending and investment to consumption in the case of the PRC—and moving up the production value chain by manufacturing high-technology, high-quality finished goods. Alternatively, the PRC could fail to do this and become stuck in what many have termed the middle-income trap, a dynamic in which middle-income countries lose their comparative advantages in high-labor, low-technology industries but fail to develop innovative, high-technology industries to continue to compete in the global marketplace. The CCP leadership's fear that the PRC will get stuck in the middle-income trap is likely what drove the powerful reaction to Hu Jintao's failed economic policies and the accompanying support for Xi's power centralization, a policy which reversed decades of political institutionalization.

The link between the political changes brought about by Xi with the support of other CCP leaders and the economic dilemma facing the PRC is only clear when the unique political-economic system in the PRC is taken into account. The CCP viewed political changes as necessary to push through economic changes because, for all its movement toward a market system since 1976, the CCP, through the Chinese government, still maintains a large hand in the Chinese economic system. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) still seem to dominate the commanding heights of the economy, from power generation

and energy to defense and telecommunications.²⁷² Capital flows, both into and out of the PRC, are highly regulated, and the government-run banks maintain a plurality of the total banking-assets within the country.²⁷³ Moreover, Chinese leaders continue to rely on massive investments from the state in order to shore up economic growth in times of trouble, most prominently with the GFC and more recently with the trade war between the United States and the PRC.²⁷⁴

But perhaps the single most important element of state involvement in the economy is not any legitimate mechanism at all, but rather the massive amount of corruption that lubricates the Chinese political-economic system. The strange amalgamation of state-control and market forces in the PRC leads to ample opportunity for corruption, which seems to be why, as mentioned previously, corruption became endemic to the Chinese political-economic system after economic reforms began in the late 1970s. Such corruption has only accelerated since then, with the median bribe amount doubling between 2000 and 2009, even when accounting for inflation.²⁷⁵ In past years, corruption arguably complimented reform, inducing many officials to continue to pursue economic reform and disappearing once that reform has had been completed.²⁷⁶ But more recently, corruption seems to have become more predatory, an obstacle rather than a compliment to reform and growth. Indeed, while the continued existence of corruption, SOEs, government banking, and all other manner of government control in the economy may not have impeded growth and reform in the past, today, with the PRC's slowing economic growth and increasing stakes surrounding successful economic reform, the impact of these factors is no longer marginal.

²⁷² “State-Owned Enterprises in the Chinese Economy Today: Role, Reform, and Evolution,” Policy Paper (Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta: China Institute, 2018).

²⁷³ Naughton, *The Chinese Economy*, 479-512.

²⁷⁴ Naughton, “China and the Two Crisis”; Daniel Shane, “China Cuts Taxes as It Warns of ‘a Hard Struggle’ Ahead,” CNN, March 5, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/04/business/china-economy-growth-2019/index.html>.

²⁷⁵ Minxin Pei, “Crony Communism in China,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/18/opinion/crony-communism-in-china.html>.

²⁷⁶ Kroeber, *China's Economy*, 206.

The problem for Xi is that the corruption and state involvement in the economy has created a system of vested interests, individuals who are invested in the continuation of the current political-economic system. This includes the CCP cadre who stand to make millions if not billions of yuan from lucrative but corrupt dealings. This also includes the bureaucrats who manage the SOE and government-run banks; if the government moved to privatize many of these parts of the Chinese economy, such individuals would quickly find themselves out of the job. This is the problem that Hu Jintao was unable to solve, and it is now the problem Xi Jinping has been tasked with solving. To Xi and the political elite of the PRC, Hu Jintao was unable to push effective economic reform because of his weak leadership and the system of collective leadership. The two factors, in the eyes of the political elite, allowed vested interests to continue to rebuff reform attempts, leading to reform stagnation in Hu's second term. Xi and the CCP have sought to fix that problem by molding Xi into a strong leader and reversing the institutionalization of collective leadership so that he will be able to personally control the reform agenda. Doing so would reduce the voice of these vested interests in decision-making and allow the CCP and the PRC to more easily push through the reforms that would allow them to escape the middle-income trap. Whether or not such a strategy will work is an open question, but there are many reasons to be doubtful about its success.

D. XI'S PLAN: WILL IT WORK?

Xi's plan to revive economic reform within the PRC is undoubtedly well-intentioned, a bid to continue the impressive trajectory of the Chinese economy and grow the PRC into a powerful state. Yet, while the intentions may be good, the execution to date has been poor. Xi has been successful in centralizing power within the Chinese political system, but he has been unsuccessful in actually carrying out the crucial economic reforms that would prevent the PRC from falling into the middle-income trap. Why has his strategy not been successful? Put simply, it is because the CCP does not want to carry through with these economic reforms for fear of losing its control over the country. Whenever CCP rule is threatened by domestic or outside forces, the necessity of maintaining political control seems to trump the imperative of economic reform. Therefore, the prospects of for the success of Xi's and the CCP's grand plan seem bleak.

The first problem with the political-economic reform plan is that the CCP misdiagnosed the problem in the first place. The ability of vested interests to influence Hu Jintao and his leadership team was not the problem that stalled reform during his second term. The problem that stalled reform was Hu's own reluctance to implement reform for fear of what it would do to the CCP's power throughout the country. In the face of the GFC, Hu prioritized stability over reform, bringing back some of the worst practices of state economic control in order to stabilize the Chinese economy. Faced with an already volatile social situation and fearing that it could become worse as a result of economic turmoil, Hu and the CCP leadership initiated massive stimulus and sent signals to banks to initiate a no-holds-barred lending spree, setting back the goal of transitioning from an investment-driven economy to a consumption driven-economy.²⁷⁷ Ironically, Hu was vindicated for this, and the party doubled down in this strategy, believing if centralization could save them from economic disaster during the GFC, it could save them from the political disaster of reform failure.

A similar if less dire dynamic has emerged under Xi despite the centralization of power in his hands. In the face of a threatening trade war, Xi and his leadership have relied on the state sector of the Chinese economy more and more to continue the country's economic growth.²⁷⁸ While such a strategy will in the short and medium terms likely allow the PRC to outlast the United States in this economic confrontation, in the long term, such a strategy only continues the CCP's and PRC's reliance on state sectors that will inevitably prevent them from successfully transitioning to a high-income economy. So long as this dynamic lasts, it is best to be cautious about the possibilities of further economic reform in the PRC and therefore about the possibilities of the PRC successfully escaping the middle-income trap. At the end of the day, the CCP has demonstrated it is unwilling to accept economic pain and risk losing political power in the short term to the detriment of both its economic and political power in the long term.

²⁷⁷ Naughton, "China and the Two Crisis."

²⁷⁸ Shane, "China Cuts Taxes as It Warns of 'a Hard Struggle' Ahead"; Mai Jun, "Will China's Private Sector Be the Big Loser in the US Trade War Fight?," *South China Morning Post*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3012420/will-chinas-private-sector-be-big-loser-us-trade-war-fight>.

This bias toward the short term seems to be the natural reaction of a party wary about the extent of its control over the country. A party more secure in its position may be more willing to accept short-term losses for long-term gain. However, the CCP has indicated it is concerned about two avenues through which their control over the PRC could deteriorate—bottom-up regime change and regime fracturing. Only one seems like a remote possibility. With respect to the former, bottom-up regime change can come about as a result of economic dissatisfaction, making the continuation of high economic growth an imperative to remain in control. However, the possibility that the Chinese people will actually succeed in overthrowing the CCP is small, namely because the repressive abilities of the Chinese state and the CCP remain strong. The PLA, while becoming increasingly professional, remains part of the party and not the state and Xi’s military reforms will only serve to reinforce that dynamic. Nor do the Chinese internal security forces show any signs of weakening; indeed, to the contrary, their budget appears larger than that of the PLA itself, suggesting a large and robust capacity to suppress dissent among the general population.²⁷⁹

Disregarding the possibility of bottom-up regime change, one is left with the possibility of regime fracturing, in which members of the CCP begin to turn against the party and pursue alternative systems of governance in the PRC, and this seems like the more dangerous threat to CCP power. This would not be a problem for a robust, ideologically united party, similar to the CCP that existed between the 1930s and the 1950s, but that is not the CCP of today. The ideology that united the CCP of the past is all but dead as the CCP is not an ideological coherent block but simply a vehicle for political power, welcoming private businessmen (i.e., capitalist) into their ranks. The boredom of CCP members is palpable in meetings extolling the party line, and books and pamphlets explaining the ideology of the CCP are dead on arrival.²⁸⁰ The CCP’s increasing repression

²⁷⁹ Adrian Zenz, “China’s Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data,” *China Brief* 18, no. 14 (March 12, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-domestic-security-spending-analysis-available-data/>.

²⁸⁰ Lim, “China’s Communists Declare War ... On Boring Meetings”; David L. Shambaugh, “The Coming Chinese Crackup,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-chinese-crack-up-1425659198>.

of students, activists, and minorities and its constant demands for pledges of loyalty are not commensurate with the attitudes of a party secure in its own, ideological power.²⁸¹

Without the ideological glue, it seems to the CCP has turned to another, less becoming adhesive to maintain the loyalty of party members—corruption. Indeed, in recent years, it seems corruption has become the glue holding the CCP together. With socialist ideology revered purely in pro forma exercises, there does not seem to be much else to keep political elite within the CCP from defecting in times of trouble for the regime. This, however, is the ultimate paradox for the CCP. Pushing through economic reforms would require a period of economic pain during which the country would transition from a middle-income country to high-income country, but such a move would minimize the opportunity for corruption. Not only would there be fewer spoils of economic growth to go around, the avenues of corruption themselves would be closed in the process of reform. And if the Chinese leadership were serious about creating a stronger economy and political system, they would have to take on and end corruption itself.

This is ostensibly what Xi has been attempting to do with his anti-corruption campaign. However, as mentioned before, true anti-corruption efforts would require a radical change in the political and legal systems in the country, changes the CCP seems unwilling to make. Xi and the CCP therefore content themselves with treating the symptoms not the causes of corruption because they know that treating the latter would undermine the CCP's rule. Not only would building up political and legal institutions take power away from the CCP but ending corruption in the Chinese political-economic system would fracture the CCP entirely, leading to internecine conflict that would tear the CCP apart and end their monopoly on political power in the PRC. That is why Xi Jinping is unwilling to do what it takes to actually end corruption in the PRC. That is why Xi, like Hu, will continue to fall back on ill-advised economic policies in times of economic and political crisis. And that is why the PRC may ultimately be doomed to fall victim to the middle-income trap.

²⁸¹ Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 24.

E. CONCLUSION: ONE STEP BACK, NO STEPS FORWARD

The failure of the PRC to transition from a middle-income to a high-income economy would certainly have dramatic consequences for the PRC itself. A slowing economic and a growing demand for the government to provide social services to an aging population seems like a recipe for social unrest. With fewer resources to draw upon, the PLA and the internal security forces within the CCP would atrophy, adding the crucial ingredient for regime change. However, the CCP has demonstrated an uncanny ability to adjust to changing times, suggesting that they could find a way to hold on to political power within the country. If that were the case, the CCP could last for a while yet, a slowly deteriorating ruling party held together by cronyism and an intense desire to simply survive.

On world stage, the failure of the PRC to transition would send ripple effects across the globe. A world without explosive Chinese growth and investment may well see slowing growth of its own. Even more worrisome is the possibility that, in the face of dim economic prospects, the Chinese debt bubble would burst, sending shockwaves across the global economy. A weakened PRC would slowly recede back to its own shores, ending the perception, especially prevalent throughout the West, that the PRC seeks to dominate East Asia. But a weakened PRC would also be a less useful political and economic partner, with limited political clout and a slowing domestic economy. Contrary to the belief of some, the economic collapse of the PRC may not be the boom for others that some may perceive it to be.

That being said, such predictions are long off in the future. The next three years, until the convening of the Twentieth Party Congress in 2022, are likely to be much of the same. Xi Jinping will continue to grasp more and more power in his own hands and continue to place the CCP at the center of Chinese life by persuasion or by force. His anti-corruption campaign is likely to continue so long as it simultaneously picks off his political foes and strengthens the legitimacy of the party. However, once the anti-corruption effort is perceived to be damaging rather than strengthening the CCP's image (an outcome that may not be that far off), Xi will likely stop the campaign. All in all, collective leadership and institutional politics will continue to wither away in the face of personal politics, while

the political climate in the PRC becomes more and more repressive and the economic climate less and less optimistic.

What began as a reaction to the failure of one leader to execute reform may result in the failure of another, only this time it will be a failure of the CCP's own creation. While Xi Jinping is undoubtedly a skilled politician and an informed economic technocrat, he alone is unlikely divine the solution to the CCP's current catch-22. While he is not without his fellow members of the PSC and Politburo to help him along the way, his seizure of power has certainly cast a pall over the political climate in the CCP, with fewer members seeming willing to speak out and even fewer willing to execute reform without orders from above. Ironically, this seems to have been the problem that institutional politics was meant to solve. By attempting to institutionalize many aspects of Chinese political space, Deng Xiaoping sought to make CCP members less concerned about competition for political power and focus their energies on effective governance. Xi and the modern CCP have turned their backs on that system, opting instead for a centralization of political power in order to better economic performance. The hope is that doing so will allow the PRC and CCP to go one step back and two steps forward. However, the more likely outcome is that CCP is left with a leader who holds unchallenged political power in the country but without the economic reforms and progress it so desires. In other word, the CCP may have created a situation in which it will go one step back and no steps forward.

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