

Bureaucratic strategies of coping with strongman rule: How local officials survive in President Xi Jinping's new order

Minxin Pei

Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been attempting to transform the Chinese Communist Party into an ideologically committed, organizationally disciplined, and politically loyal regime. His efforts include enforcing strict discipline and curtailing the perks of officials. This attempt appears to be unpopular among the party's rank and file and has encountered various forms of resistance. Resourceful local officials have attempted to protect their interests and resist the leadership's efforts to strip them of the perks and benefits that until now they have taken for granted. Their passive resistance appears to be a serious obstacle to the realization of Xi's ambitious vision. Ironically, many of Xi's own policies, such as emphasizing ideological indoctrination and suppressing civil society, have made it more difficult to combat the subterfuge by local officials. The party's top-down approach is unlikely to succeed in converting ideologically cynical CCP officials into true believers, while local officials have no feasible means of forcing the top leadership to change course. This political stalemate is likely to continue.

One of Xi Jinping's most ambitious and prized political objectives is the transformation of the Chinese party-state into an ideologically revitalized, organizationally disciplined, and politically loyal instrument of rule. During his last seven years in power, Xi has devoted enormous political energy to achieve this objective, relying primarily on an unrelenting anti-corruption drive to instill fear among Chinese officials. In addition, he has issued numerous new rules to cut the perks previously taken for granted by local officials, such as spacious office space, free use of government cars, and generous entertainment budgets. At the same time, he has launched a vigorous campaign of ideological re-indoctrination to strengthen the commitment of Chinese officials to regime values. Taken altogether, it is not an exaggeration to argue that Xi has replaced an incentive-based system with one centered on fear and ideology. The former, according to Xi's speeches on corruption, was responsible for endemic corruption, loss of ideological commitment, and lax organizational discipline. In Xi's view, continuation of such a system will threaten the long-term survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹ The question is whether the solution adopted by Xi—the revival of rules, policies, and rhetoric reminiscent of the Stalinist and Maoist eras—has been effective.

Based on official documents, press accounts, and statistics released by the CCP's Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), it appears that Chinese officials have responded to the return of strongman rule by resorting to diverse survival strategies. Although it is difficult to gauge the overall impact of such strategies and behavior on the effectiveness of Xi's ambitious agenda to transform the Chinese party-state, it is reasonable to conclude that Xi will face nearly insurmountable obstacles to turn resourceful Chinese officials who are long accustomed to an incentive-based system into politically loyal, ideologically committed, and obedient servants of his new order.

Bureaucratic passivity and inertia

New phrases such as lazy governance (懒政), malingering governance (怠政), mediocre governance (庸政), do-nothing officials (为官不为), and even passive corruption (消极腐败), describing the behavior of Chinese officials, emerged with growing frequency shortly after Xi launched his agenda to transform the Chinese party-state. Premier Li Keqiang delivered the first high-level denunciation of bureaucratic passivity in October 2014 when he criticized the “lazy governance” among officials and labeled bureaucratic passivity as “passive corruption.”² As the party’s chief official in charge of the economy, Premier Li should have first-hand experience dealing with the effects of passive resistance among lower-level officials. In his speech on fighting corruption in February 2015, Li provided some evidence revealing how bureaucratic passivity was slowing down the economy. He said, “In 2014 Only 50 percent of the land approved for construction was used.” This, according to Li, “was a rare occurrence in many years.” “Why did nothing happen even after the projects were approved, funding secured, and land provided?” he asked. The reasons, according to Li, are found in the mindset and behavior of officials. He denounced those officials who pocketed their salaries but delivered mediocre performance or who were slackening off on their jobs as a form of passive corruption.³

Judging by the many stories about lazy or “do-nothing” officials during the last seven years, denunciations by top officials and repeated crackdowns targeting such lazy officials did not seem to produce the desired outcomes. In recent months, Xi Jinping has repeatedly criticized the passivity of officials. In a major speech on party-building delivered to the central government’s administrative agencies in early July 2019, Xi rejected the notion that anti-corruption was the reason for bureaucratic passivity. “We must not accept the anti-corruption drive as the excuse for shirking one’s responsibility and doing nothing” (决不能把反腐败当成不担当、不作为的借口). He called on CCP officials not to be “well-fed do-nothing lazy officials” (不做饱食终日、无所用心的懒官).⁴

A notable feature of bureaucratic passivity under Xi’s rule is that Chinese officials have adjusted their behavior in a way that minimizes the risks of their being accused of abusive or indifferent attitudes, but this did not make any difference in terms of their getting things done. Official press stories describe this new phenomenon as “Although the door is easier to get in and officials give you a pleasant look, it is still hard to get things done” (门虽好进、脸虽好看、事仍难办). In its attempt to crack down on bureaucratic passivity, the CCP has punished a large number of officials accused of “lazy governance” by imposing various disciplinary actions. The party’s discipline inspection committees frequently publish the names of disgraced officials and disclose their alleged misdeeds. Such official press releases give us a glimpse of the patterns of bureaucratic passivity among local officials.

1. Inaction or shoddy performance in implementing high-priority government policies

One of Xi’s top priority domestic programs is “precision poverty alleviation” (精准扶贫). But its implementation at the local levels has encountered bureaucratic passivity and indifference. In one county in Guizhou, 62 local officials were disciplined because they failed to identify households and residents living below the poverty level, and they embezzled or misappropriated funds meant for poverty alleviation and poorly implemented measures to help the poor.⁵

Strict enforcement of environmental regulations is another top priority for Xi and he is credited with the recent improvements in China's environmental protection. But the official press continues to report on numerous instances of inaction, violations, and outright fraud by local officials who poorly perform such enforcement activities.

According to an inspection team dispatched by the central government, when it inspected Zibo, a prefecture-sized city in Shandong in August 2017, it received complaints about a local company that had been illegally dumping toxic materials. However, the county government where the company was located reported to the inspection team that no such problem existed. In July 2018 the city government of Zibo reported that the problem had already been addressed. The truth is that the company was continuing to dump toxic waste and it had already illegally buried several million tons of hazardous solid waste. In 2017, the city government of Zunyi in Guizhou province was warned that it was not effectively implementing State Council regulations on improving air quality. It was asked to produce an action plan. The plan presented by a city district government contained a provision committing it to "hold at least one meeting each month to discuss environmental protection." In reality, no such meetings were ever held. To cover up for this inaction, the district's party committee forged documents to show that such non-existent meetings had been convened.⁶

2. *Inaction or foot-dragging to commence approved investment projects and to address local social issues*

Examples include the following:

- The municipal government of Haikou in Hainan province decided in 2015 to develop a large vegetable farm with its own funds to supply vegetables to the city. The funds were appropriated in August to a district agency. But the agency took no action and after one year nothing had happened.⁷
- A local government in Tangshan city in Hebei province received 72 million yuan in central government funding to provide affordable housing in late 2012, but as of the end of September 2016 the project had still not gotten off the ground.⁸
- In November and December 2017, migrant workers lodged complaints at the labor and social security bureau of the Dongcheng district government in Beijing about unpaid wages and they staged collective protests at district worksites. But the bureaucratic officials did not take any effective measures to resolve the problem.
- After residents complained about the illegal mining activities of a company in a county in Hunan in June 2017, several local government agencies took no action, claiming the matter was outside of their jurisdiction. Even after the firm was ordered to cease operations, it continued its illegal mining activities for one year.⁹

3. *Continuation of illicit activities and practices*

Despite explicit government regulations banning activities and practices such as collecting unauthorized or illegal fees or obtaining appropriations through fraudulent means, local officials have continued such practices, as indicated by a State Council circular denouncing such behavior:

- Between June 2014 and September 2016, the municipal development and reform commission of Nanchang in Jiangxi province collected more than 5.7 million yuan in “assessment fees” in violation of a National Development and Reform Commission rule.
- In 2015, officials in three townships in Ningxia used false information to obtain subsidies to renovate unsafe housing but it spent the funds on unauthorized projects.
- Between January 2015 and August 2016, a municipal agency in Leiyang in Hunan province collected 10.9 million yuan in various fees from local coal-mine operators in violation of government rules.¹⁰

“Formalism” and “bureaucratism”

In the parlance of the CCP, “formalism” (形式主义) refers to the practice of ostensible or superficial implementation. Officials engaging in “formalism” merely go through the motions but deliver no results. “Bureaucratism” (官僚主义), another well-known scourge of the Chinese party-state, is a catch-all phrase referring to, among other things, dereliction of duty, negligence, and indifference. Local officials resistant to central-government policies or reluctant to perform the tasks assigned to them often deploy tactics of both “formalism” and “bureaucratism” to avoid unpleasant or unrewarding chores. These two practices seem to have become so prevalent that, at the end of 2017 after reading an internal report by the Xinhua News Agency on the prevalence of these two phenomena, Xi issued instructions on combating formalism and bureaucratism. According to a summary of his instructions, Xi called for tough measures to deal with the problems of “frequently and enthusiastically pledging support but doing little and implementing poorly (表态多调门高、行动少落实差). The Xinhua report that attracted Xi’s attention described some of the more typical manifestations of “formalism” and “bureaucratism”: officials conducting superficial inspection tours, local governments building prestige projects to impress senior leaders, repeated and endless meetings, formulaic government documents, buck-passing, and words unmatched by deeds. Immediately after Xi issued his instructions, the General Office of the Central Committee (中央办公厅) sent out a circular directing party officials to take tough measure and to resolutely rectify formalism and bureaucratism. (采取过硬措施，坚决加以整改).¹¹ One year later, Xi was still emphasizing the importance of fighting “formalism” and “bureaucratism.” In a speech to the CDIC in January 2019, he called on the party to pay close attention to “new trends of formalism and bureaucratism and to adopt effective remedies to rectify them” (紧盯形式主义、官僚主义新动向新表现，拿出有效管用的整治措施).¹²

Representative practices of “formalism” and “bureaucratism,” according to a document issued by the CDIC General Office (中纪委办公厅) in September 2018, are manifested in four main areas:

- In implementing the spirit (of the policies) of the party center, officials prefer showy, empty, and mechanistic means; their work consists of no more than empty slogans; they hold meetings and issue documents to implement policy, but such documents lack specific actions or measures.
- Officials are callous about the interests and well-being of the people and indifferent to problems reported by the people. They treat people rudely and arrogantly and they provide poor and inefficient services.
- In fulfilling their duties, officials resist assuming responsibility and they take action slowly. They also engage in abusive or fraudulent actions, such as fabricating stories, models (典型), and statistics, and covering up problems and reporting false information.
- Excessive meetings, inspections, and assessments. Most of these are of low quality, superficial, and duplicative. The contents of the assessments are not practical; they are too frequent and require the completion of an excessive number of forms and supporting materials; inspections are pro forma and for show only.¹³

Disciplinary actions by local party organizations contain more concrete examples of “formalism” and “bureaucratism” identified by the CCP leadership as obstacles to implementation of Xi’s agenda. Representative samples are listed below:

- “Potemkin Villages,” Chinese style: By no means a novel phenomenon, this practice of “formalism” involves covering up shabby buildings or other unpleasant sights to deceive one’s superiors. Another practice is reporting false statistics to inflate one’s accomplishments. Between 2013 and 2016, a county party chief in Chongqing misappropriated nearly 30 million yuan allocated for poverty reduction and improvement of unsafe housing to burnish the appearance of residential buildings along the county’s highways, apparently to impress visiting dignitaries.¹⁴ In 2017 a group of local officials in a county in Guangdong province inflated the value of completed construction projects by 2.4 times in order to show they had exceeded their target.¹⁵ To prove that they had been dutifully holding “party-building” meetings, the party chief and his colleagues in a municipal agency in Zhuhai, in Guangdong province, fabricated and amended the meeting minutes 60 times between May 2017 and August 2018.¹⁶
- Excessive meetings and documents: Officials in a district in Zhejiang province reported that some of them had to spend half of their time attending various unnecessary meetings. One local party chief in an unidentified city in northeast China said he had to attend nearly 20 meetings each week.¹⁷ Although it is impossible to know the percentage of unnecessary meetings that local officials have to attend, data provided by local governments after the crackdown on “formalism” suggest that as

many as one-half of such meetings may be unnecessary. For example, in March 2019 the CCP committee of Hunan province ordered that the number of meetings held by governments at the county level and below be reduced by 30 to 50 percent. In addition, compared with 2018 the number of inspections and assessments of provincial-level entities were to be cut by 80 percent. Inspections and assessments of counties, townships, and villages were to be cut by 50 percent.¹⁸

- Negligence and dereliction of duty: Another bureaucratic bane of the Chinese party-state, such practices have proven to be highly resistant to Xi’s campaign to make the bureaucracy more responsive and effective. For example, in 2016 a local official in charge of enforcing safety regulations in Guangdong allowed an unauthorized construction project to continue for more than a year. After a major accident on the site killed a worker, the official fabricated records to show he had in fact enforced the safety rules.¹⁹ The director and the deputy of a poverty-reduction bureau in a county in Shanxi approved funds for projects without any review or inspection. As a result, projects that did not qualify for assistance received more than 2.2 million yuan.²⁰

Although we do not have sufficient evidence to conclude whether the problems of “formalism” and “bureaucratism” have become worse under Xi than they were during the Jiang and Hu periods, it is highly likely that Xi’s policies have provided greater incentives for local officials to practice “formalism” and have made it more difficult to combat “bureaucratism.” Specifically, Xi’s numerous ideological indoctrination campaigns and measures to enforce the party’s organizational discipline (such as strict requirements to attend party meetings) require that local officials perform more political rituals to demonstrate loyalty. For ideologically cynical officials, the optimal survival strategy is to go through the motions of complying with the directives of the party central leadership but to do very little in reality. Similarly, Xi’s crackdown on civil society and social media has removed what little societal monitoring local officials formerly faced. Despite Xi’s exhortations against bureaucratic laziness, indifference, negligence, and abuse, it has become more difficult to monitor local officials or for them to be held accountable since policing by their superiors is costly and often impractical.

Defiance and business as usual

One of the critical questions about elite politics during the Xi era is whether his use of fear as an instrument of rule has been effective in terms of forcing voluntary compliance and submission. Based on official data, the number of party officials and members disciplined for violating the so-called “Eight Rules” (八项规定) formulated by Xi in early December 2012, it appears that he continues to encounter serious difficulties to enforce his strict behavioral. Among other things, the “Eight Rules” seek to restrict the perks for officials. Especially noteworthy is the eighth rule, which calls for austerity and mandates strict adherence to the rules on official perks such as housing, official cars, and other benefits. In October 2017, the Politburo issued a new and more detailed document on enforcing the “Eight Rules” (中共中央政治局贯彻落实中央八项规定的实施细则)²¹ The most noteworthy feature of this document is that it spells out specific restrictions on the perks for China’s top leaders (for example, only Politburo Standing Committee members may fly Chinese air force planes on inspection tours, whereas Politburo

members must fly on commercial flights). Following promulgation of this document, all Chinese government agencies issued their own detailed rules on how to implement the “Eight Rules.”

Because Xi has invested enormous political capital to enforce the “Eight Rules,” compliance with these rules can be used as a proxy to gauge whether local officials have truly accepted and submitted to Xi’s new political order. Based on official data on the number of party members “dealt with” (处理) for violating the “Eight Rules,” we can argue that a large number of party members and officials continue to resist these austerity measures (see Table 1). The term “dealt with” includes investigations, informal sanctions (such as admonitions), and formal disciplinary penalties. Official data from 2013 to August 2017 indicate that about 250,200 CCP members and officials were “dealt with” for such violations, and about 136,100 of them (54 percent) were “disciplined.” To be sure, the fact that the increase in the number of CCP members and officials “dealt with” for violating the “Eight Rules” may also be indicative of stricter enforcement measures. But this explanation may not be convincing. To the extent that rising enforcement measures have a stronger deterrence against violations, it can be expected that there will be fewer violations. But apparently this is not the case. The more plausible explanation is that the “Eight Rules” are highly unpopular among officials because they significantly curtail the officials’ perks and income. Additionally, these rules may lack moral authority since appear not to apply to the top leadership, in particular to Xi himself, judging by the lavish press coverage he receives in the official press (something explicitly prohibited in the Eight Rules for Politburo members) and the extravagant international conferences the central government has been hosting in Beijing in recent years.

Table 1: Number of officials who ran afoul of the “Eight Rules,” 2013–2018

Year	Number of CCP Members “Dealt with” for Violating the “Eight Rules”
2013	7,692
2014	23,646
2015	33,966
2016	57,723
2017	71,644
2018	92,218

Source: CDIC data.

As for the specific acts deemed to be violations of the “Eight Rules,” the CDIC provides the following examples:

- Dining and entertainment at public expense
- Accepting gifts and cash
- Spending public funds on overseas junkets
- Holding extravagant private banquets²²

Based on data collected by the CDIC from January 2013 to August 2016, party officials and party members primarily engage in five types of violations. Using official cars in violation of

the rules (either using bigger or fancier cars or using official cars for private purposes) constituted the largest number of violations (19 percent); receiving cash payments for benefits or subsidies in violation of regulatory limits (10 percent); holding extravagant wedding or funeral banquets (9 percent); accepting gifts and cash in violation of the rules (8 percent); and spending public funds on banquets (7 percent).²³ These numbers provide a useful clue about the difficulty of enforcing strict austerity measures on CCP officials and members. By seeking to limit the perks, side income, and personal freedoms that they have taken for granted for decades, such measures have alienated a large number of the party’s rank and file and have encountered growing resistance.

Another tell-tale indication of the defiance and resistance among CCP officials can be found in the press releases announcing disciplinary actions against officials accused of “major violations of discipline.” The phrase “resisting the organization’s investigation” (对抗组织审查) appears in a large number of cases. (The party calls itself an “organization.”) By the party’s definition, “resisting the organization’s investigation” consists of witness tampering, refusing to confess or cooperate, forging evidence, and other acts.²⁴ Between January 2017 and July 2019, 33 of the 50 “tigers” (officials with the rank of vice minister and above) engaged in activities “to resist the organization’s investigation,” and 57 percent of senior officials in centrally controlled SOEs, party organs, and financial institutions resisted investigation between January 2018 and July 2019. During the first seven months of 2019, 62 percent of officials with the rank of *ting* (厅) or *ju* (局) (equivalent to a mayor of a large city or a director-general) resisted investigation.²⁵

Conclusion

The evidence and examples provided in the above analysis reveal the difficult challenges Xi is encountering in his attempt to transform the Chinese party-state from an incentive-based regime to a regime based on fear and ideological loyalty. The adage describing the difficulty of enforcing central edicts—“The mountains are high and the emperor is far away”—seems as relevant today as it was in imperial times. The difficulties of forcing Xi’s political vision and agenda on a regime with more than 90 million party members are almost insurmountable in terms of monitoring, policing, and disciplining a party larger than the population of most countries in the world (if the CCP were a nation, it would be the 16th most populous country in the world, behind Vietnam and ahead of the Democratic Republic of Congo). The experience of the Maoist era, the only period in which a strongman attempted to enforce his personal political vision on the CCP with a mixture of ideological indoctrination, personality cult, and mass terror, illustrates the limits of such a top-down approach. The most likely cause of the resistance among Chinese officials to Xi’s vision and agenda is both their abandonment of an orthodox Communist ideology and their rejection of a retrograde system that threatens the privileges and wealth they have long enjoyed and taken for granted in the post-Mao era.

To be sure, the top leaders are aware of the resistance within the Chinese bureaucracy. But their options are limited. Unwilling to restore the incentive-based system or concede defeat to a disgruntled bureaucracy, the top leadership has chosen to double down on the use of fear to enforce Xi’s vision. As a result, the party’s anti-corruption agencies have been mobilized to combat the assorted bureaucratic pathologies described in this essay. Their principal tools are

encouraging whistle blowing against malingering officials, more frequent inspections by leading officials and anti-corruption teams, periodic campaigns, and publicizing the punishment of officials who have run afoul of the party’s rules against “lazy governance, inaction, formalism, and bureaucratism.”²⁶ Based on the amount of official propaganda excoriating such undesirable practices, we can conclude that the measures adopted by the party have yet to yield satisfactory results. This political stalemate pitting an ambitious strongman determined to achieve his transformative agenda against an ideologically cynical and self-interested bureaucracy will continue to be a unique—and important—feature of elite politics in the Xi Jinping era.



Minxin Pei, editor of China Leadership Monitor, is Tom and Margot Pritzker '72 Professor of Government. He is also non-resident senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Pei has published in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, The New York Times, the Financial Times, the Wall Street Journal, Project Syndicate, Fortune.com, Nikkei Asian Review, and many scholarly journals and edited volumes. He is the author of China's Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay (Harvard, 2016); China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy (Harvard, 2006), and From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union (Harvard, 1994). Pei formerly was senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1999–2009) and assistant professor of politics at Princeton University (1992–1998). He was the Library of Congress Chair in U.S.-China Relations from January to August 2019.

Notes

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³ “李克强：在国务院第三次廉政工作会议上的讲话,” http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-02/28/content_2822857.htm (accessed July 31, 2019).

⁴ 新华网“习近平全面提高中央和国家机关党的建设质量,”
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¹² “习近平在十九届中央纪委三次全会上发表重要讲话,”
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¹⁷ 中央纪委国家监委网站,“整治形式主义官僚主义 浙江从深挖病灶开始,”
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