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Scrambling to Achieve a Moderately Prosperous  
Society

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## About the Editor

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# Reviving Leninism and National Rejuvenation: Can Tighter Cadre Control Produce Better Governance?

Joseph Fewsmith

Meeting with reporters following the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi Jinping declared that to realize the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴), generations of Chinese had struggled without success. Only after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded could it unite the Chinese people and, through hard struggle, transform a poor and backward China into an increasingly prosperous, new China.<sup>9</sup> A few days later, Xi led his Politburo Standing Committee colleagues to the History Museum on Tiananmen Square to view the exhibit “Road to Rejuvenation” (复兴之路). The exhibit reinforced Xi’s message that only the CCP could lead China from poverty to independence, wealth, and power. It was there that Xi first enunciated his mantra, the “China Dream” of realizing the great rejuvenation.<sup>10</sup> This would be achieved in stages: the first centenary goal of achieving a moderately prosperous society by 2021, and the second centenary goal of achieving a fully modernized society by 2049. Thus, within days of Xi being inaugurated as general secretary, the basic themes that have animated his tenure—nationalism, national revival, the role of the CCP, and the dream of wealth and power—were enunciated.

Looking back over the now seven years of Xi’s time in power, it seems apparent that one can divide the time into two parts, one of “destruction” and one of “construction,” to repurpose the old Maoist rhetoric. While not strictly separated chronologically, the first phase was dominated by political struggle—the purging of political rivals and the concentration of power—while the second phase, just coming into view, has been characterized by an effort to rebuild the CCP into a stricter, more responsive (to the center) party, characterized by important structural changes to prevent the corruption and dysfunction that characterized the Hu Jintao era from recurring.

The first phase began even before Xi took power. In September of 2012, Xi disappeared for two weeks in an absence that still has not been explained. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Xi was bargaining hard. Bo Xilai had been arrested the previous spring, and the head of the General Office, Ling Jihua, whose son’s death in an automobile crash in March had just been exposed, was suddenly moved to the United Front Work Department. It appears that Xi argued that corruption and party discipline were major problems and that he needed to have real power if he were to deal with these crises. Rumors suggested that he threatened to resign if he were not given the necessary authority.

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<sup>9</sup> “Full Text: China’s New Party Chief Xi Jinping’s Speech,” BBC, November 15, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-20338586>.

<sup>10</sup> “Xi Jinping: Follow the Past and Herald the Future, Continue the Dauntless Advance of the Chinese People toward the Great Rejuvenation” (习近平：承前启后 继往开来 继续朝着中华民族伟大复兴目标奋勇前进), Xinhua, November 29, 2012, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/29/c\\_113852724.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/29/c_113852724.htm).

Apparently, he was given the authority; shortly after the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2012, the first “tiger” in Xi’s new campaign against corruption, Li Chunheng, deputy party secretary of Sichuan province, would fall. Li was part of a chain of alliances that would ultimately lead to Zhou Yongkang, who would be arrested for corruption in December 2014 and convicted in April 2015. Bo Xilai, who had been detained in March 2012 before Xi took power, was tried and convicted in August 2013. This unfolding campaign against corruption was soon compounded by a parallel campaign to prevent “peaceful evolution.” Although it was never labeled in those terms, it quickly became obvious that that is what it was. It quickly became obvious that Xi was obsessed by the fall of the former Soviet Union. When Xi went to Guangdong in December 2012, he said that the Soviet Union had fallen not only because no one was a “real man” who would stand up to oppose it but more fundamentally because people—party members—had lost their “ideals and convictions.”<sup>11</sup> Xi would soon oversee a campaign in China to restore those ideals and convictions there.

Xi’s campaign against peaceful evolution was helped, however inadvertently, by the liberal newspaper editors of *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) who wrote a New Year’s editorial declaring that their “China Dream,” already Xi’s buzzword for building a strong China, was “constitutional government.” Xi and the propaganda authorities acted quickly to turn out the now infamous “Document No. 9,” which listed seven tendencies that must be fought against: Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, freedom of the press, historical nihilism, and doubting the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

So within a very short period of time, Xi had been able to carry out a campaign against corruption, raise issues about the threat posed by “peaceful evolution,” and launch an ideological campaign to restore the “ideals and convictions” of the Chinese people. Over time, these campaigns would take down his political enemies, remake the political elite, and begin to open up new means of controlling the Party and the broader society. In other words, these campaigns would not only consolidate Xi’s position in power—defying the predictions that he would be a weak and conservative leader—but make a concerted effort to revive China’s Leninist political system. In doing so, he would turn away from Deng’s efforts to reform China’s political system and return to something more akin to Mao Zedong’s system.

### The Dengist Political System

To see how far Xi has moved from the Dengist system, it is helpful to lay out a few characteristics of that system. During the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping had five years in a tractor factory in Nanchang, Jiangxi, to contemplate what had gone wrong in the Maoist era. When he finally became preeminent leader in 1978, he began changing the political system in important ways, four

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<sup>11</sup> Chris Buckley, “Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning”, *New York Times*, 15 February 2013, [https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/world/asia/vowing-reform-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-airs-other-message-in-private.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/world/asia/vowing-reform-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-airs-other-message-in-private.html?_r=0).

<sup>12</sup> An English translation of the memo can be found at: “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

of which are relevant to this comparison. First, coming off the Cultural Revolution, Deng took steps to lower the political temperature in China. Under the slogan “practice is the sole criterion of truth,” Deng focused on economic work; “class struggle” was no longer the “key link.” Second, and closely related to the first, he took steps to end the cult of personality. Deng deliberately took the third rank position on the Politburo Standing Committee. Although Deng was clearly the paramount leader, he gave the first two positions in the political hierarchy to General Secretary Hu Yaobang and Premier Zhao Ziyang. Mao was made human sized again, and the 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in Our Party’s History since the Founding of the PRC” did much to change the ideological atmosphere and open up space for intellectual freedom.<sup>13</sup> Third, Deng pushed to open China, encouraging the development of the market economy domestically and opening of the country diplomatically. Fourth, and perhaps most important, he took steps to institutionalize the succession process. As Deng told Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, for a leader to name his own successor was “feudal.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, when Jiang Zemin was appointed general secretary in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, Deng prevented him from naming his own successor in turn by appointing Hu Jintao as such, creating a balance (albeit a fragile one) within the leadership and the Party.

## Phase II: Bringing Leninism Back In

Much commentary about Xi Jinping has emphasized his centralization of power and personalistic rule. What has been less noticed has been his efforts to revivify China’s Leninist system. In the academic literature, Leninism is usually seen as going through phases. Jowitt, who has written with great insight on Leninism, argued that there are three basic phases. The first is transformation, in which the Leninist party transforms society, destroying traditional social structures, and reforming society to mirror the party. Second, as the Party consolidates these changes and its own power, it maintains isolation from society. This exclusionary phase keeps social forces at arm’s length. Finally, as the revolutionary mission runs its course, the Party adopts an inclusionary approach that tries to bring the party and social forces into concordance. This is the phase of reform.<sup>15</sup>

Jowitt sees reform as deadly for the Party. As the Party tries to reconcile its maintenance of rule with social forces, it opens itself to bribery and other corrosive forces. Writing some years ago, Jowitt did not broach the idea that nationalism and technology might maintain the Leninist party for an extended period. Certainly the development of local factions and the dysfunctionality that the CCP has witnessed would not have seemed strange to Jowitt, but the idea that a Leninist party could reinvigorate itself, restoring a sense of mission, would have surprised him. But that seems to be what the CCP under Xi is doing, or trying to do.

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<sup>13</sup> “Resolution on Certain Questions in Our Party’s History since the Founding of the PRC,” 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP, June 1981, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC\\_90\\_anniversary/2011-06/22/content\\_22839137.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC_90_anniversary/2011-06/22/content_22839137.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Answers to the Italian Journalist Oriana Fallaci,” in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1975-1982)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 326-334.

<sup>15</sup> Ken Jowitt, *The New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

The key to this effort to revivify Leninism is gaining greater control over the Party and extending the reach of the Party. The basic characteristic of any Leninist regime is party control of the cadres, that is, higher-level party committees appoint those at a lower level. In the past, China tried to manage two levels down, so, for instance, the central government would appoint provincial party secretaries and governors (ministerial level) as well as deputy party secretaries and vice governors (deputy ministerial level). This “two-level-down” practice involved too many cadres to manage, so in 1984, the Party switched to “one-level-down” management. The problem with one-level-down management, as Minxin Pei points out, is that it creates incentives for lower-level cadres to curry favor with their superiors.<sup>16</sup> If the cadre system were truly meritocratic, one would not need to curry favor, but in fact, many cadres believe that just doing their jobs is not enough to secure promotion. Hence, gifts and bribes became an important part of the cadre system.

There is a commission for discipline inspection (CDI) at each level down to the county level, but the problem has always been that the members of that commission are ultimately under the control of the party secretary at that level. Discipline inspection commissions are supposed to be under the dual leadership of the party committee at the same level and the discipline inspection commission at the next highest level, but in fact, the party secretary at the same level has been able to exert control because he or she provides the resources needed. In recent years, the CCP has been trying to strengthen the vertical control. Xi Jinping has pushed this much further than previous party leaders.

This push got underway in November 2016 when the General Office promulgated the Plan for Experimenting with Reform of the State Supervisory Structure in Beijing, Shanxi, and Zhejiang (关于在北京，山西省，浙江省开展国家监察体制改革试点方案). Shortly thereafter, in January 2017, it was announced that Yang Xiaodu, who would be named a member of the Politburo and Secretariat at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October that year, was a member and office director of the newly established Central Leading Small Group for Deepening the Reform of the State Supervision Structure (中央深化监察体制改革试点工作领导小组).

The rise of Yang Xiaodu is a bit surprising. Born in Shanghai in 1953, he served in Tibet from 1976 to 2001. As deputy commissioner of Naqu District, he must have been well known to Hu Jintao, who served as a party secretary there from 1988 to 1992. Yang certainly thrived under Hu’s successors, Chen Kuiyuan and Guo Jinlong, who succeeded Hu as party secretaries in Tibet. Yang rose to be a deputy party secretary in the autonomous zone. In 2001, he was transferred to Shanghai as deputy mayor. In 2007, when Xi Jinping served as party secretary of Shanghai, Yang was head of the United Front Work Department of the city, so he would have been well known to Xi. In 2013, he became head of the Third Inspection Team sent out by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). He must have impressed his boss, Wang Qishan, because he became a deputy secretary of the CCDI in 2014. In 2016 he took on the concurrent position of minister of supervision.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Minxin Pei, *China’s Crony Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> For Yang Xiaodu’s career history, see: “Comrade Yang Xiaodu Curriculum Vitae,” Central Commission for Discipline Inspection Website, May 16, 2019, [http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xxgk/ldjg/yxd/201905/t20190505\\_193380.html](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xxgk/ldjg/yxd/201905/t20190505_193380.html).

Following the appointment of Yang, experiments were carried out in Beijing, Shanxi, and Zhejiang. Shanxi had been the target of a major corruption investigation in the wake of the Ling Jihua case, and Beijing no doubt wanted to bring that province under control. The experiment in all three locations moved very quickly. By April 2019, the prosecuting functions of the supervisory commissions at various levels had been transferred to the CDIs at corresponding levels. Although the task was to create a National Supervision Commission with subordinate units branching downward, in actuality it was the CDIs at various levels that were being strengthened. Both employees of the old people's procuratorate and the CDI at the corresponding level were working in the same building. Officials of the new supervisory commissions were both members of the CDI *and* the supervisory commissions.<sup>18</sup> In other words, they were both state and party officials, meaning that the new organizations had the authority to investigate both party and non-party people.<sup>19</sup>

Although one stated purpose of the reform was to reduce redundant investigations by the CDIs and the procuratorate, the more important reason was to strengthen supervision of lower-level offices and to make the investigative offices more independent of the local party secretary. Under the new rules, although local CDIs still need the party secretary's approval to initiate certain investigations, they can initiate other investigations on their own. In either case, they must pass the same materials to their superordinate CDI—and the higher level CDI not only leads the casework, they can overturn the decision of a local party secretary if that secretary declines prosecution.<sup>20</sup> This weakens the local party secretary's control while strengthening the vertical controls.

According to figures released by China, many leading cadres, called “tigers,” have been caught. “Tigers” are generally defined as cadres of vice-ministerial rank and above; in other words, they are the centrally-managed cadres (中管干部). Although there is not an official figure for the number of centrally-managed cadres, it is believed that there are about 2,500. In 2017, Yang Xiaodu stated that since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012, 440 centrally managed cadres had been investigated. Of these, 43 were full or alternate members of the Central Committee and nine were members of the CCDI. Moreover, over 8,900 cadres at the department level (厅) had been investigated and 63,000 cadres at the division (处) level had been investigated. Some 278,000 basic level cadres had been disciplined, and 3,453 cadres had been brought back from overseas.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jinting Deng, “The National Supervision Commission: A New Anti-Corruption Model in China,” *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 2018.52, 70, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1756061617300848>.

<sup>19</sup> “The Experiments with the Reform of the National Supervision Structure Have Achieved Real Results,” [国家监察体制改革试点取得实效], People's Daily via Chinese Communist Party News (中国共产党新闻网), June 1, 2017, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1106/c117092-29628258.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Deng, “The National Supervision Commission,” 65-66.

<sup>21</sup> *Xinhua*, October 19, 2017, available at [baike.baidu.com/reference/2296555/364dlvgVZefZrwJ0O...oOpCUosmXiSbJctA5J7zHc\\_pfacF\\_iD00TNaevC1gBB\\_mRQ8CnB3sVkXB](http://baike.baidu.com/reference/2296555/364dlvgVZefZrwJ0O...oOpCUosmXiSbJctA5J7zHc_pfacF_iD00TNaevC1gBB_mRQ8CnB3sVkXB).

In 2019, the CCDI opened investigations into 68 centrally-controlled cadres, sending 15 to the judicial system for prosecution. Throughout the country, supervisory commissions cited 526,000 cadres for violations of party discipline (党纪处分) and cited 135,000 non-party cadres for violations of public affairs (政务处分).<sup>22</sup> These figures suggest a closeness of supervision far exceeding anything seen in the Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao eras.

At the same time that Xi has overseen the change in the way corruption is investigated, he has also reinvigorated the inspection system. The CCP has used inspectors (巡视员) from its earliest days. The system is intended to gather unfiltered information for top leaders and to convey instructions directly to local leaders. Inspectors are sometimes authorized to make changes they deem necessary on behalf of the central leadership.

In 2009 the Party established a Central Leading Small Group for Inspection Work (中央巡视工作领导小组). He Guoqiang, as head of the CCDI, was its first leader, and its office was established within the CCDI. When Wang Qishan took over as head of the CCDI, he also became head of this leading small group; since the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Zhao Leji, as head of the CCDI, took over this group, with Yang Xiaodu and Chen Xi, head of the Organization Department, as deputy heads. In 2015, the CCDI promulgated “Regulations on Inspection Work,” and in 2018 the Party promulgated the “Plan for Central Inspection Work, 2018-2022.” Although these changes extend back into the Hu Jintao era, it is apparent that inspection work took on new life as Wang Qishan spearheaded the drive against corruption. Inspection teams went to provinces, stayed for extended periods of time, and referred cases to the People’s Procuratorate for prosecution.

In 2018, the CCDI promulgated “Work Plans for Central Inspection Work, 2018-2022.” Inspections were carried out in 27 provinces and municipalities, 18 central departments, eight centrally managed enterprises, two centrally managed financial enterprises, and put the leading cadres for the “four teams” (四套班子)—namely the Party, the government, the National People’s Congress, and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress—of ten vice-ministerial level cities under investigation. Altogether Zhao Leji said that 126,000 party organizations at the county and city level had been inspected, uncovering 975,000 problems of various sorts, including 190,000 cases of violating party discipline, of which 36,000 were further investigated.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In October 2013, Wang Qishan told a meeting of party leaders that it was necessary to create a mechanism so that cadres would not “dare” to be corrupt, would not be “able” to be corrupt, and

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<sup>22</sup> Zhao Leji (赵乐际), “Loyally Carry Out the Responsibilities Conferred by the Party Charter and Constitution; Strive to Realize High Quality Discipline Inspection and Supervisory Work in the New Era” [忠实履行党章和宪法赋予 努力实现新时代纪检监察高质量发展], Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, January 11, 2019, [http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/toutiao/201902/t20190220\\_188859.html](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/toutiao/201902/t20190220_188859.html).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



would not “want” to be corrupt.<sup>24</sup> Wang’s formula was formalized in the “Some Regulations on Inner-Party Political Life in the New Era” adopted at the Sixth Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in October 2014.<sup>25</sup> For the first few years of Xi’s term, as the campaign against corruption unfolded, it seemed that the central leadership was creating conditions under which cadres would indeed not dare to be corrupt. But it was difficult to see what would prevent cadres from going back to old habits once the campaign passed.

Beginning in 2016, however, as the plan to develop the National Supervision Commission took place, it became apparent that Xi had far-reaching structural reforms in mind. As these measures went from the experimental stage to being implemented across the country, a new inspection regime came into view, one in which local party leaders had much less ability to limit investigations and much less ability to escape scrutiny. Moreover, higher-level organization had significantly greater control over lower-level organizations. The extension of control to non-party cadres as well as party cadres meant that the inspection regime was far more comprehensive. It can even reach into “service” organizations, such as universities and hospitals, whose employees are all state employees.<sup>26</sup> It extended down farther, including the township level, and it was supplemented by a re-invigorated inspection regime. No longer were investigations into corruption occasioned by either political enemies or particularly egregious cases but rather they were systematized, making it increasingly difficult to escape the dragnet. China is now clearly in the stage of making it so the cadres “cannot” be corrupt. This is an important change. No longer can we believe that China will revert to a pre-Xi era when he leaves the stage; on the contrary, he is making changes that will affect China for years to come.

Whether these changes will, as Xi hopes, strengthen the Party and extend its hold on power is less certain. The new centralization and heightened scrutiny raise at least two questions of concern. The first is whether such tight scrutiny is compatible with incentivizing cadres to foster development. One of the keys to China’s development over the years was the initiative local cadres took to draw in investment and spur growth. In recent years, there has been much talk about cadres not daring to do anything beyond their basic jobs; they are too afraid of making mistakes to undertake development that might call their behavior into question. The increasing tightness of surveillance makes it likely that cadres will find it even more difficult going forward.

The other issue is the recruitment and retention of capable cadres. Already, in the wake of the campaign against corruption, there has been a wave of cadres resigning their positions in favor of

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<sup>24</sup> Wang Qishan (王岐山), “How Can We ‘Make the Cadres Neither Want to, be Able to, Nor Dare to be Corrupt?’” [让干部不想不能不敢腐“咋落实? ], *CPC News Weekly* (天天周刊), October 2013, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2013/1018/c241220-23251723.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “Regarding Some Standards of Internal Party Political Life under New Circumstances” [关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准], 6th Plenum of the 18th Central Committee, November 2, 2016, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c\\_1119838382\\_5.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c_1119838382_5.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Kerry Brown, “‘Supervision Power’: Party Discipline under Xi Jinping,” in *Party Watch Annual Report 2018*, Center for Advanced China Research, <https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2018/10/18/Party-Watch-Annual-Report-2018>.

pursuing business.<sup>27</sup> Cadres are not paid well and promotions come slowly. The incentives for pursuing a cadre career in the past were security, the possibility of power, and the ability to profit from one's position. The campaign against corruption has made cadre positions less secure and certainly less profitable. China will no doubt be able to fill its cadre force, but one wonders whether it will attract the best and the brightest, or whether those people will find other avenues to pursue their dreams. Would a less capable cadre force bring about poorer governance? It can't help.

Xi sees tightening control over the Party as the key to realizing China's national rejuvenation and staying in power. But Xi's gamble on greater centralization and surveillance of cadre behavior risks curbing the cadre activism that has been central to China's growth over the last three decades. Can such strict control be compatible with the growing diversity of China and the innovation and entrepreneurship that will be necessary for realizing the greatness and rejuvenation Xi seeks?

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<sup>27</sup> Li Lianjiang, "The Cadre Resignation Tide in the Wake of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress," *China: An International Journal* 17.3, 2019, 188-99, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/732783>.