

# The Evolution of China's Anti-Corruption Policies: From Ancient China to the Modern China

## Çin'in Yolsuzlukla Mücadele Politikalarının Evrimi: Kadim Çin'den Modern Çin'e

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### Abstract

*Corruption-based bribery crimes have historically threatened the development of the Chinese economy, and the involvement of state institutions and Chinese companies in these crimes has led to questions about the effectiveness of Beijing's policies. The spread of corruption throughout the country has prompted the government to re-examine its policies on this issue. Inadequate legal regulations and the lack of a strong judicial system have contributed to the increase in financial and corruption crimes. In this context, the Beijing administration has taken tough measures to prevent crimes that threaten political and economic stability and has carried out an effective fight by applying criminal sanctions. The administration has imposed severe penalties, such as death and life imprisonment, to provide a serious deterrent and has also implemented reforms to strengthen legal regulations and increase the effectiveness of criminal sanctions. This study aims to analyze the historical development of corruption and bribery crimes in China and to examine the effectiveness of the policies implemented during the Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping eras in a comparative manner. To this end, the historical development of Chinese criminal law and approaches to corruption will first be addressed. Subsequently, Mao Zedong's policies on corruption and economic crimes will be systematically examined, and the legal and political dimensions of these policies will be discussed. Xi Jinping's strategies, practices, and the effects of his policies will be comprehensively evaluated. Ultimately, this study aims to reveal the decisive role of legal regulations, strong political will, and criminal sanctions in China's stability and to examine the economic and social effects of anti-corruption policies from a comprehensive perspective.*

**Keywords:** China, Bribery, Corruption, Anti-Corruption, Xi Jinping.

### Öz

Yolsuzluğa dayalı rüşvet suçları, tarihsel olarak Çin ekonomisinin gelişimini tehdit etmiş ve devlet kurumları ile Çinli şirketlerin bu suçlara karışması, Pekin yönetiminin politikalarının etkinliğinin sorgulanmasına yol açmıştır. Ülke genelinde yolsuzluğun yaygınlaşması, Pekin yönetiminin bu konudaki politikalarını yeniden gözden geçirmesine neden olmuştur. Hukuki düzenlemelerin yetersizliği ve güçlü bir hukuk sisteminin eksikliği, finansal ve yolsuzluk suçlarının artmasına yol açmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Pekin yönetimi siyasal ve ekonomik istikrarı tehdit eden suçların önlenmesi için sert önlemler almış ve cezai yaptırımlar kullanarak etkin bir mücadele sergilemiştir. Bu doğrultuda Pekin yönetimi, idam ve müebbet hapis gibi ağır cezai yaptırımlar uygulayarak ciddi bir caydırıcılık sağlarken, aynı zamanda da hukuki düzenlemelerin güçlendirilmesi ve cezai yaptırımların etkinliğini artıracak reformları hayata geçirmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Çin'deki yolsuzluk ve rüşvet suçlarının tarihsel süreçteki gelişimini analiz etmek ve Mao Zedong ile Xi Jinping dönemlerinde uygulanan politikaların etkinliğini karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, öncelikle Çin ceza hukukunun tarihsel gelişimi ve yolsuzluğa yönelik yaklaşımlar ele alınacaktır. Ardından, Mao Zedong'un yolsuzluk ve ekonomik suçlara ilişkin benimsediği politikalar sistematik bir şekilde incelenecik ve bu politikaların hukuki ve siyasi boyutları tartışılacaktır. Son bölümde ise, Çin tarihindeki en etkili uygulamaları hayata geçiren Xi Jinping'in stratejileri, uygulamaları ve politikalarının etkileri kapsamlı bir şekilde değerlendirilecektir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma hukuki düzenlemelerin, güçlü siyasi iradenin ve cezai yaptırımların Çin'de istikrar üzerindeki belirleyici rolünü ortaya koymayı ve yolsuzlukla mücadele politikalarının ekonomik ile toplumsal etkilerini kapsamlı bir perspektifle incelemeyi hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Rüşvet, Yolsuzluk, Yolsuzlukla Mücadele, Xi Jinping.

**JEL Codes:** D73, F52, G38, N45.

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## Introduction

China is currently the world's second-largest economic power. Based on current economic indicators, it is expected to surpass the United States in the near future to become the world's largest economy. This projection is not merely speculative but rather a highly probable outcome. Indeed, China today holds the position of the world's largest trade hub. According to the 2022 report by the United Nations Statistics Division, China alone accounts for 31.2% of global production. In the same year, the United States, the world's largest economic power, accounted for 16.3% of global production (Statista, 2024). Approximately one out of every three units produced in the world is produced in China. Being an economic power is, of course, a very important development for the social development of the Beijing administration and the Chinese people. Indeed, as China's economic power increases, the living standards of individuals in the country are improving. However, economic development has been accompanied by an increase in economic and corruption crimes in the country. This is because uncontrolled rapid economic development has enabled individuals, groups, and government officials to use their positions and social networks for their own interests. Social networks/relationships are quite common in China and hold a special place in Chinese culture. In fact, these relationships are defined as Guanxi in Chinese (Koçer & Yüce, 2024: 552).

Guanxi not only strengthens social networks between individuals or groups, but also plays an important role in the development and growth of the business world. Indeed, Guanxi is an important tool for doing business and strengthening social networks in China, and it plays an important role in reinforcing the roles of individuals, groups, and institutions in society. However, the strengthening of relationship ties, the establishment of new social connections, and the formation of partnerships have led to an increase in corruption in the country. China's economic development policies in recent years have also had a significant impact on foreign policy. Indeed, every leader who has assumed the presidency since the Mao era has considered economic development to be as important as developments in foreign policy. In fact, they have prioritized economic stability as a prerequisite for being able to take a strong stance in foreign policy.

The last four Chinese presidents, who equate economic development with foreign policy, explain its importance as follows. Deng Xiaoping (1992) said, "We must maintain our country's economic stability. Development is the only reality for the Chinese nation. Otherwise, we will be destroyed by the power of the countries we are in economic competition with." Jiang Zemin (2001) said, "We must deeply understand our country's productive capacity and needs, focus on economic development, and pursue the right policies to ensure that we have the motivation behind this development." Hu Jintao, (2011) "Development is important for our country's economic growth, but continuing development is more important." Xi Jinping, (2013) "We must pursue a strategic economic plan in which development is more important than anything else" (Lewis, 2014: 373).

The stable development of the Chinese economy has been both a problem and a goal that Chinese leaders have emphasized. In this context, it would be incorrect to say that the criminal justice system alone is decisive in maintaining economic stability. However, criminal law plays an important role in preventing crimes that directly harm the economy in order to ensure its sustainability. Indeed, the deterrent power of Chinese criminal law, which includes long-term imprisonment and the death penalty, plays an important role in preventing crimes that threaten the Chinese economy. For example, depending on the type of crime, criminal penalties imposed on individuals range from one year to life imprisonment and the death penalty. Such severe penalties discourage individuals from committing crimes in order to avoid long-term imprisonment.

Therefore, long prison terms are intended to prevent individuals from committing crimes. However, despite all criminal sanctions, individuals may still commit crimes due to humanity's inherent tendency toward crime. What is important here is the extent to which political decisions taken to prevent individuals, as well as high-level bureaucrats and politicians working in public institutions, from engaging in financial and economic crimes are effective in legal terms. Although criminal law plays an important role in combating economic and corruption crimes, politicians are the highest authority in the enactment of laws. The decisions made by politicians give laws their binding nature. Indeed, economic and corruption crimes are not a new agenda item in Chinese history.

Throughout history, corruption has been prevalent during the imperial era, the Republic of China, and modern China. Although China is a communist country, it is a society with deep-rooted traditions and customs. In this context, it attaches great importance to teachings that benefit society. The most powerful way to keep large societies together is to adhere to social moral rules and spread these rules throughout the country. Based on this statement, Confucianism occupies an important place in Chinese society. The basic teachings of Confucianism defend high moral values while strongly rejecting any kind of immoral behavior. (D'Ambrosio, 2015: 145).

In particular, the involvement of high-ranking officials in public institutions, who are in a position to make decisions on behalf of Chinese society, in corruption cases has led to serious moral decay beyond being a major crime. This situation

means disregarding the values of Confucianism. The primary aim of this study is to examine the historical development of corruption and bribery offenses in China and to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies implemented to combat these crimes. In particular, the study analyzes the impact of corruption on the social and institutional structure, as well as the legal and political responses developed by the state to address this phenomenon. How did China's anti-corruption policies differ structurally and in terms of implementation during the Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping eras, and how did these differences affect the effectiveness of China's anti-corruption efforts? Within the scope of this question the research focuses on two critical turning points in China's history of anti-corruption efforts: the Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping eras. Within this framework, both leaders' approaches to combating corruption, along with their political decisions, punitive measures, and legal reforms, are comparatively analyzed. The main objective is to identify the similarities and differences between the policies adopted during the Mao and Xi periods and to explain how these policies influenced the prevalence of corruption and the ethical transformation within public administration. To achieve this objective, the study employs qualitative research methods, specifically document analysis. Data were collected from secondary sources concerning corruption cases in China, official government documents, reports of international organizations such as Transparency International, Chinese national news archives, and relevant legal regulations. During the analysis phase, major corruption cases from the Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping periods were evaluated alongside the legal and political responses to these cases, as well as the social implications of the reforms implemented. The evaluation was based on three main criteria: the scope of legal regulations, the forms of implementation and punitive measures, and the content and effectiveness of anti-corruption policies pursued during the Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping periods. Through this methodological framework, the study provides a comprehensive examination of the historical transformation of China's anti-corruption policies and offers a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of the measures taken during the Mao and Xi administrations.

## 1. China's Political Determination to Fight Corruption

Corruption crimes occur in every country, and the processes of combating corruption vary. When corruption and its causes are examined in China, it can be said that corruption has a unique model specific to China. In this context, there are two basic theories regarding corruption, which is still widespread and growing in China. The first is the view that the main source of corruption stems from the country's one-party system. The other is that the Guanxi system is responsible for the increase in corruption crimes in the country. According to the first theory, the Chinese Communist Party plays a major role in the increase in corruption and the inability to prevent it. Indeed, the vast majority of those involved in corruption cases are low- and high-level officials in government positions (Fisher, 2015: 8).

Minxin Pei, an expert on Chinese governance, states that only one-third of government officials act in accordance with the law and that the one-party system is gradually reducing this percentage. Experts who support the other theory argue that corruption is part of the Guanxi practice, which is rooted in China's historical foundations. Chinese politics has traditionally been intertwined with nepotism. A large part of the ruling class consists of the children of the elite who held power during the Mao era and members of the Chinese princeling party (Taizidang). Studies on corruption in China are not limited to Minxin Pei's research (Fisher, 2015: 9).

Heidenheimer, who has made significant contributions to the study of corruption in China, has divided corruption incidents in the country into three categories. According to him, black, gray, and white corruption constitute the types of corruption in the country (He, 2000: 244). Black corruption includes crimes such as bribery and embezzlement. Gray corruption refers to individuals in positions of authority disregarding legal processes and using both legal and illegal means to increase the profits of their institutions and the benefits of their employees. Such corruption methods include establishing front companies, demanding additional payments under the guise of service fees, and receiving a share of the additional income obtained. Another aspect of gray corruption is the use of public budgets for unnecessary local expenditures and luxury consumption. White corruption is a culturally accepted form of corruption based on the concept of "Guanxi." This type of corruption involves a form of nepotism and includes favoritism toward individuals with strong business connections (He, 2000: 245).

In China, corruption is a concept that affects power calculations and social order, producing negative political and legal consequences; therefore, studies on China often provide different definitions of corruption in relation to its natural origins and legal and political dimensions, and the subject carries uncertainties from theoretical and conceptual perspectives. Among these uncertainties are the long-term damage to economic growth caused by the mismanagement and misuse of resources, the questioning of the government's legitimacy, and the weakness of the legal system. In other words, it is the disregard of legal rules for the purpose of obtaining private gain without effort. Corruption has been a problem that Chinese leaders have struggled with from the imperial period to the modern republican period. Numerous anti-corruption policies, which address this problem from different perspectives, highlighting chronic deficiencies in both operational and

structural conditions, have characterized the social and political structure of Chinese leaders. Indeed, the fight against corruption has been one of the most important issues for Chinese President Xi Jinping during his 10 years in power, with dozens of high-ranking officials being removed from office during this period as a result of corruption investigations. However, despite the Beijing administration's tough measures to combat corruption, corruption continues to be widespread in the country.

Social, economic, and political corruption are the most common types of corruption in the country. Political corruption is a type of corruption seen among Politburo members and members of the Chinese Communist Party. Government officials engaging in corruption for personal gain falls under this category. Bribery, nepotism, and crony capitalism are among the types of political corruption (Orr, 2024). Politicians can accept bribes in exchange for good relations and benefits. Nepotism refers to the appointment of family members or close friends to government institutions and ensuring their cooperation with the state, despite the availability of qualified talent. Crony capitalism refers to the granting of privileges to the companies of family members and friends of high-ranking government and bureaucratic officials. Political corruption is the most common type of corruption in the country.

Economic corruption refers to the misuse of public funds or resources. This type of corruption includes crimes such as tax evasion, embezzlement, and government fraud. Social corruption refers to corruption that prioritizes interests in the provision of basic public services. Examples of this type of corruption include paying bribes to receive a quality education at the best schools, paying bribes to receive the best healthcare, and paying bribes to gain easy access to medical resources. On the other hand, this type of corruption is frequently committed in order to benefit from healthcare services (Orr, 2024). Indeed, the Beijing administration imposes severe criminal penalties in the fight against crimes that endanger human health. In a recent case, Zheng Xiaoyu, the head of China's State Food and Drug Administration, was executed in 2007 for approving the production of counterfeit drugs in exchange for a bribe of \$850,000 (Liu, 2012: 24).

Corruption/bribery is referred to as white-collar crime in academic literature. White-collar crimes refer to non-violent illegal acts committed by individuals, businesses, or government officials for financial gain. The term was coined by American sociologist Edwin Sutherland in 1939, challenging the view that crime is limited to the lower classes and emphasizing the prevalence of criminal activity among the economic upper classes (Sutherland, 1940: 1). This should not be interpreted to mean that this type of crime is insignificant. Indeed, public officials, senior managers, and executives of national private and public institutions commit non-violent financial/bribery crimes in order to obtain unjust financial gains in their active working lives. Corruption has a negative impact on the economies of countries around the world. According to a 2018 report by the United Nations, corruption worldwide costs the global economy approximately \$2.6 trillion. According to the report, this amount is equivalent to 5% of the GDP of all countries in the world (UN, 2018). Corruption crimes include tax evasion, money laundering, and bribery of multinational companies and government officials. Corruption is considered one of the most important economic issues of the 21st century (Ryan, 2000: 333). The fact that trillions of dollars are transacted without being recorded undoubtedly causes countries to lose both tax revenue and business.

China is one of the countries whose economy has been most affected by corruption. Despite taking significant steps toward becoming the world's number one economic power, its economy continues to suffer losses due to corruption. For this reason, corruption poses the greatest challenge to the Beijing administration's efforts to maintain economic stability. It is not possible to fully explain the cost of corruption to the Chinese economy for two reasons. The first is that it takes a long time to identify the individuals involved in corruption. The second is that those who commit corruption cover up their crimes and conceal their crimes. However, it is possible to estimate the approximate amount of damage.

According to Chinese experts who have studied corruption, between 1999 and 2001, there was an economic loss of 1.3 billion yuan. Chinese economist Andy Xie Guozhong, in his study on corruption in China, noted that there has been a significant increase in corruption cases in the country. According to him, the loss suffered by the Chinese economy due to corruption in the country is equivalent to 10% of China's GDP (Zhou, 2016: 1010). The occurrence of bribery incidents related to corruption makes it difficult for foreign investments to come to China. Therefore, the lack of foreign investment in China imposes an economic cost on the country. The occurrence of bribery incidents involving billions/millions of dollars not only causes serious damage to the Chinese economy but also leads to a lack of trust in international trade.

This is not because there is no strong criminal law. Crimes related to corruption are clearly regulated in Chinese criminal law, and criminal penalties are specified. According to Chinese criminal law, those involved in bribery are subject to life imprisonment or the death penalty. The penalty for offering bribes to Chinese politicians or senior officials ranges from one year to life imprisonment. The Beijing administration imposes strong criminal penalties to prevent politicians and senior officials in the country from engaging in bribery. However, bribery is not a phenomenon unique to China. While Chinese officials may accept bribes by abusing their positions, Chinese company executives may also offer bribes to foreign politicians or high-ranking officials in order to conduct business abroad (Yin, 2024). However, with President Xi

Jinping taking decisive steps to combat corruption since taking office in 2012, significant changes were made to the 1980 Criminal Law. With the new regulations that came into effect in 2015, Chinese citizens involved in corruption not only within China but also abroad were also included in the scope of the crime. As a result, Chinese politicians and executives who offered bribes to foreign officials or managers of international organizations were sentenced to a minimum of three years and a maximum of 10 years in prison and fines.

The problem is that all files related to corruption investigations are controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, which hinders efforts to combat corruption. Corruption should not be confused with simple theft or embezzlement. Although corruption has damaged the Chinese economy, as it has in other countries around the world, it is not perpetrated by ordinary citizens. The vast majority of corruption is committed by high-ranking officials of the Communist Party and public bureaucracy, as well as executives of companies with budgets in the billions of dollars. Due to the strong political influence of these individuals, corruption cases are often covered up by political will. As a result, politicians who enact laws to prevent corruption are themselves directly involved in the crime. This situation may hinder the effective implementation of laws aimed at preventing corruption. Therefore, corruption remains a significant issue in China.

## 2. China's Historical Development in Preventing Corruption Crimes

The prevalence of corruption in a particular country and the strategies developed to combat it vary depending on the political, economic, legal, and ethical management approaches developed by that country. Each leader has tried different methods to address this issue, taking into account both internal and external dynamics. Corruption is quite prevalent in some countries, while it is less prevalent in others. Some countries have taken quite harsh measures to combat corruption. China is one of the first countries that comes to mind when the issue of corruption is raised. With a population of 1.4 billion and the world's second largest economy, China has developed innovative policies to combat corruption. Throughout its political history, China has developed various methods and policies to combat corruption, and in this process, its anti-corruption policy has undergone constant change and transformation, from the ethical and legal-based approach of ancient China to the legal and political reforms of the modern era. The first unwritten criminal laws in Chinese history appeared during the Xia Dynasty (2000 BC – 1600 BC). During this period, severe penalties such as tattooing, nose cutting, foot cutting, castration, and execution were imposed on those who violated social order and moral rules and committed theft (Xiaotong, 2021: 115).

These unwritten laws, which were enforced during the Xia Dynasty, were codified during the Zhen Kingdom (536 BC – 513 BC) and became the first written criminal laws in Chinese history. During the Warring States Period (475 BC – 221 BC), these laws were compiled into a book. Compiled by King Kui Li of Wei, "FANJIN" is the oldest known criminal law book in Chinese history and consists of six sections. Although not much is known about the content of the book, the section codes deal with crimes such as theft, corruption, looting, robbery, resistance to state authority, disruption of social order, and moral corruption (Wang, 2017: 15). As can be seen, crimes that harmed China's socio-political and socio-economic structure during the Wei Kingdom period were identified in an effort to protect social order. These laws formed the basis of the Qing Dynasty's (1644–1911) criminal laws until the end of the 19th century (Wang, 2017: 16).

The first systematic anti-corruption policy in history was implemented during the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD). Emperor Wu of Han, who possessed strong will and determination, established regional inspectorate offices (Cishi) in thirteen provinces as part of his anti-corruption policy, thereby ensuring the supervision and control of officials in these regions. This system brought regional administrations under control and was structured as a central supervisory agency (Yushi Tai) between 206 BCE and 220 CE. Known as the Imperial Censorship Office, this system spread throughout the Han Empire (Yang, et al., 2024: 4). During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the Yushi Tai was replaced by the Ducha Yuan (Chief Investigation Bureau). Censorship and inspection offices played an important role in the Han and Ming empires' policies to combat corruption. During these two periods, severe penalties, including the death penalty, were imposed on those involved in corruption. In addition to the death penalty, harsh legal measures were put in place and local government oversight was increased (Yang, et al., 2024: 5).

In the early years of the 20th century, Sun Yat-sen seized control of China by overthrowing the Qing Dynasty—the country's last imperial dynasty—during the revolution of October 10, 1911, and established the Republic of China in 1912. With the founding of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen initiated a new legal process. However, this effort remained incomplete due to his death in 1925 (Smeets, 1992: 66). After Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, who became the second leader of the Republic of China, authorized the Nanjing government in 1928 to revise the criminal laws that had been in force since the Qing Dynasty. In this context, a criminal law commission was first established in 1931, a draft law was approved in 1934, and in 1935, the criminal laws of China were codified (Xiaoqun, 1997: 7). As can be seen, throughout history—from the early royal period to the final stages of the Republic of China—kings and heads of state have fought against economic and corruption-related crimes.

In this struggle, political decision-makers played a direct role in the implementation of harsh legal sanctions as the most effective deterrent. In this regard, monetary fines, long-term imprisonment, life sentences, and even capital punishment were enacted. Although criminal law has existed in ancient China for over 2,000 years, each dynasty, king, and leader/head of state who came to power altered the previous legal system during their rule. Indeed, after the Nationalist Forces (Kuomintang) lost the civil war against the Chinese Communist Forces, Mao Zedong assumed power and established the People's Republic of China in 1949, launching a new legal process. During this preparatory phase of the Chinese criminal law system, the Central People's Legal Affairs Committee drafted a provisional criminal law plan aimed at preventing embezzlement and counter-revolutionary uprisings (Leng, 1997: 363).

In this regard, between 1954 and 1963, the National People's Congress drafted the first criminal code of modern China, consisting of 33 sections and 286 articles, aimed at preventing economic and corruption-related crimes and ensuring social order. However, the proposed criminal code was never enacted due to the economic and political problems caused by Mao Zedong's failed policies—the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Tanner, 2007: 20). Indeed, the failure of these two policies, which targeted the development of the Chinese economy and social order, led to the collapse of the national economy, the emergence of new economic crimes, and growing criticism of China's criminal law system.

Following the death of Mao, the founding leader of modern China, in 1976, Deng Xiaoping succeeded him in 1978 and, like his predecessors, initiated a new wave of legal reforms. He specifically sought to address the economic issues caused by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—two policies from the Mao era that had severely hindered China's economic progress.

The National People's Congress approved the creation of a Chinese criminal code that had been initiated during the Mao era but could not be enacted due to economic and political challenges. Following one year of work initiated in 1978, the Chinese Criminal Code, comprising 13 sections and 192 articles, was enacted in 1979. The codification of this law marked a turning point in the stabilization of China's social order and economic framework. Indeed, as a result of the reforms launched during Deng Xiaoping's era, China began opening up to the world, achieving macroeconomic growth over the next 30 years. However, this economic growth also gave rise to both legal and illegal commercial activities within the country. The emergence of new crimes and the insufficiency of the existing criminal laws in addressing them necessitated the creation of updated criminal codes. Within this context, the most recent iteration of modern Chinese criminal law, the 1997 Criminal Code, includes a detailed explanation of crimes threatening the socialist market economy in its third section. To combat corruption that threatens the socialist market economy, the Beijing administration has implemented a two-pronged strategy. The first strategy involves the establishment of a transparent, fair, and strengthened legal system.

In this way, individuals involved in criminal activities are subjected to the legal penalties specified in the law, provided that their crimes are proven. The second strategy is based on the fact that the crimes listed in the 1997 Chinese Criminal Code are generally not the types of crimes that can be committed by ordinary individuals. These crimes consist of large-scale economic offenses. Therefore, in order for such crimes to be committed, there must be intermediaries such as legal entities like banks and companies, as well as high-ranking bureaucrats and politicians as natural persons. In this context, Article 30 of the Chinese Criminal Code imposes judicial and administrative sanctions on both legal and natural persons involved in corruption-related crimes. Those found guilty are immediately sentenced to death, and in cases where execution is deemed unnecessary, the sentence is commuted to life imprisonment. Within this framework, the Beijing administration has adopted a three-stage strategy for enforcing anti-corruption laws. In order to ensure that crimes and penalties are fair and transparent, special authorities have been granted to the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

The duties and responsibilities of these institutions are as follows: Supreme People's Court: Interprets and applies laws enacted by the President of China in courtrooms, Supreme People's Procuratorate: Investigates and prosecutes corruption cases, Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: Investigates corruption cases involving members of the Communist Party. To ensure that the activities of these three institutions are carried out within a framework of stability and justice, the National Supervisory Commission was established in 2018. The purpose of this commission is to oversee anti-corruption efforts and to investigate public officials, state-owned enterprises, and public institutions (China Legal Experts, 2024).

In conclusion, it is evident that modern China's approaches to combating corruption have evolved over time and have been shaped by the shifting internal dynamics of each historical period. Each leader has demonstrated a different method in addressing corruption. Mao prioritized ideological purification and internal party discipline in his anti-corruption efforts, whereas Deng did not pursue a strong anti-corruption policy, focusing instead on implementing market reforms. The most comprehensive and centralized anti-corruption policy in the country's history has been implemented under the

leadership of Xi Jinping. While combating corruption, Xi, like Mao, carried out internal party purges to eliminate his strongest rivals. However, Xi's approach goes beyond the domestic level; he has extended the anti-corruption campaign to an international scale.

### 3. The Anti-Corruption Campaign During the Mao Zedong Era

In modern China, each serving leader has developed anti-corruption policies. However, due to differing historical conditions, political agendas, and economic models, these policies have been implemented in varying ways. During Mao Zedong's era, corruption did not generally result in significant financial losses. Nevertheless, corruption during this period typically occurred through goods and services rather than cash transactions (Wedeman, 2012: 1). Mao did not view corruption solely as a legal issue but rather as an ideological deviation and a threat to the revolutionary spirit. As such, he imposed harsh and severe criminal punishments in his anti-corruption efforts. These included capital punishment, long-term imprisonment, and public trials and executions. A key principle behind Mao's strict approach was to prevent political elites and high-level bureaucrats from engaging in corrupt activities. Within this framework, Mao launched the Three-Anti Campaign in 1951 and the Five-Anti Campaign in 1952 to combat corruption. These two campaigns represent the first political anti-corruption movements in modern Chinese political history. The Three-Anti Campaign targeted corruption, waste of public assets, and bureaucratic degeneration committed by government officials and members of the Chinese Communist Party. The Five-Anti Campaign, which targeted the capitalist class, aimed to combat bribery, embezzlement of state property, tax evasion, fraud in government contracts, and economic espionage (Sheng, 2006).

During these campaigns, which focused on political corruption and capitalist actors, a total of 1,226,984 individuals—including Communist Party officials, civil servants, and private company executives—were investigated on corruption charges. Of these, varying penalties were imposed: 230,000 Communist Party members were expelled from the Party and dismissed from public service, 59,182 individuals were fined, 9,942 were sentenced to prison, 67 received life sentences, and 57 were sentenced to death (Feng, 2002: 116).

The execution of high-ranking officials among those sentenced to death was perceived as a clear indication of Mao's determination in combating corruption. Notably, Liu Qingshan, the Secretary-General of the Tianjin Municipality, and Zhang Zishan, the Administrative Chief, became the first senior public officials in modern Chinese history to be executed for corruption. Convicted of embezzling 1.76 million yuan, Liu and Zhang were sentenced to death in 1952 by direct order of Mao. Mao explained the executions of Liu and Zhang with the following statement: "If we execute these two high-ranking officials, we can prevent 20, 200, 2,000, or even 20,000 corrupt officials from committing crimes" (Teng, 2014). This declaration reflects the extent of Mao's commitment to anti-corruption policy. By making this statement, he emphasized that all individuals—regardless of their rank—are equal before the law and would face appropriate punishment. As part of his broader anti-corruption strategy, Mao aimed to convey this principle to society as a whole. Although the severe criminal sanctions imposed during the Two Campaigns were partly effective in curbing crimes that threatened the Chinese economy, the absence of an official criminal law system at the time ultimately led to the emergence of new economic crimes.

**Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Anti-Corruption Campaigns During the Mao Zedong Eras**

Criterion	Mao era: "Three Anti / Five Anti" Campaigns
Target groups	Campaigns in 1951-52 (the Three Anti Campaign: "anti-corruption, anti-waste, anti-bureaucracy"); the Five Anti Campaign: "bribery, theft of state property, tax evasion, public contract fraud, theft of state economic intelligence" as targets.
Content – Objectives	The targets were primarily the state and party bureaucrats, private sector businesspeople, and capitalist elements.
Methods / implementation	Strengthening state control, reducing bureaucratic waste and corruption, increasing state oversight of private capital, and controlling economic resources. For example, private businesspeople were heavily targeted in the Five Anti Campaign.
Importance / Impact	Mass mobilization, calls for public "confessions," intense scrutiny of the private sector and bureaucracy, heavy penalties, public condemnation for some. For example, the "Three Anti" Campaign targeted bureaucrats, while the "Five Anti" Campaign targeted private sector operators.
Target groups	It was important in terms of consolidating power and increasing the administrative capacity of the newly established Chinese state in its early days. Combating corruption and bureaucratic waste supported the legitimacy of the state.

Mao Zedong's anti-corruption policies were shaped closely in accordance with socialist revolution principles and Communist Party ideology. At the core of these policies was the elimination of elements perceived as threats to the socialist regime and party ideology. Accordingly, even members of the Chinese Communist Party were subjected to investigations, and strict measures were taken against those involved in corruption. To secure public support and inform the populace, individuals implicated in corruption were publicly exposed.

Mao's policies were grounded in an ideological framework and encouraged active participation from the public. Although corruption cases arose during Mao's era, due to China's closed economic and political model, corruption did not become a widespread issue. Generally, corruption during this period remained limited to local and minor incidents and did not pose a significant threat in the context of China's historical corruption cases. Nevertheless, the Three-Anti and Five-Anti Campaigns initiated by Mao marked an important turning point in the fight against corruption. Under the discourse of anti-corruption, these campaigns also served as part of Mao's strategy to consolidate his political authority. These campaigns constituted a comprehensive purge targeting members of the Chinese Communist Party who opposed Mao and defended the legitimacy of their own views. Despite Mao's strong leadership position, the policies he implemented led to deep divisions and factionalism within the party. In this context, Gao Gang, Chairman of the Planning Commission who controlled the industrialized regions of Northeast China, and Rao Shushi, Chairman of the East China Administrative Committee and Head of the Central Committee's Organization Department, were tried in 1955 on charges of factionalism. This process has been interpreted as part of Mao's strategy to consolidate power against his ideological and political rivals (Xiao, 2010: 116).

Mao's policies against counter-revolutionary activities and corruption were not limited to specific areas. In Yunnan province, Zhao Jianmin, the Chinese Communist Party secretary, was accused of espionage and declared a traitor. The alleged crime was leaking information related to the Kunming Garrison. Studies on this matter have indicated that the charges against Jianmin were fabricated. Another significant example relates directly to corruption charges (Song, 2011). Between 1955 and 1957, under the Sufan Movement, a comprehensive campaign was launched to purge all elements involved in counter-revolutionary activities and corruption (Lu, 2017: 6). Apart from these developments, in 1970 Mao Zedong initiated a new campaign called the One Strike-Three Anti Campaign. Launched during the Cultural Revolution, this campaign targeted crimes such as corruption, bribery, opportunism, wastefulness, and embezzlement. As part of the investigations and prosecutions, millions of people were subjected to repression policies, being labeled as thieves, spies, and counter-revolutionaries. Ultimately, the main objective of all anti-corruption and counter-revolution campaigns initiated during the Maoist era was to prevent corruption, ensure centralized control, and purge dissenting elements within the party (Bryan, 2020: 16).

#### 4. Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Policy: From National to International

Two major political transformations have occurred in the political history of the People's Republic of China. The first change took place during the era of Mao Zedong, who seized control of the country's government in 1949. As the founding leader, Mao ruled the country with an authoritarian approach until his death. The second major transformation occurred in 2012 when Xi Jinping assumed office. Xi Jinping, elected as the country's 5th President, became the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. He derived this power from the constitutional amendment enacted in 2018. During his second presidential term, the National People's Congress of China amended the Constitution to remove the term limits for the President and Vice President. Thus, with this constitutional change, Xi made his leadership indefinite (Feng, 2019: 11). Xi Jinping's "Tigers and Flies" campaign, launched in 2012, brought about a profound change in China's political and administrative structure. This new anti-corruption policy is regarded as the most intense, widespread, and stringent implementation in China's history. Through this campaign, high-ranking officials and lower-level bureaucrats in the state administration were targeted, turning the fight against corruption into a systematic and comprehensive approach. Officially launched nationwide in 2013, the campaign became the central agenda item of Xi's political platform.

The main goal of the campaign was to eliminate corruption within the Communist Party of China's leadership ranks, ensure party discipline, and regain public trust. In this context, senior officials labeled as "Tigers" and lower-level bureaucrats and civil servants called "Flies" were targeted. To ensure the campaign's effectiveness, the Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and China's judicial organs launched extensive simultaneous investigations into those accused of corruption. Both internal oversight mechanisms and public whistleblowing played a significant role in initiating these investigations (Reddy, 2022). After Xi Jinping assumed the roles of General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of the People's Republic of China, he implemented radical changes in political, economic, legal, and anti-corruption policies across the country. Xi launched a comprehensive anti-corruption campaign in response to the widespread corruption cases in China. This campaign was widely supported by the general public, and Xi began to be regarded as a hero in the eyes of the people. The public support for Xi's campaign and his decisive steps in anti-corruption policies stem from his application of anti-corruption measures across the entire country without discrimination against any individual, institution, or private sector entity that threatens China's economy and the future of the Communist Party of China. At the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, former President Hu Jintao commented on this issue and corruption, stating that corruption constitutes the greatest obstacle to the development of the Communist Party and the country's economy (D'Amico, 2015: 21). If corruption is not combated effectively and comprehensively, the political legitimacy and future of the

Chinese Communist Party will be seriously jeopardized. Indeed, this assessment has also been expressed by the current leader of the Chinese state, Xi Jinping. According to Xi, corruption has the potential to lead to both the institutional collapse of the Chinese Communist Party and the dissolution of the state structure (Zúñiga, 2018: 1). During the “Flies and Tigers” anti-corruption campaign that was launched, investigations primarily focused on the local level (Huhe et al., 2022: 201).

**Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Anti-Corruption Campaigns During the Xi Jinping Eras**

Criterion	Xi era: Anti-Corruption Campaigns (Tigers & Flies, Fox Hunt, Sky Net)					
Time to start and context	The campaign was launched after 2012, following the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party; under Xi Jinping's leadership, it targeted both high-level officials ("tigers") and low- to mid-level officials ("flies"). In 2014, as part of international cooperation, Fox Hunt and in 2015, Sky Net					
Target groups	The targets were clearly divided: "Tigers" were high-ranking party/military state officials; "Flies" were lower-level officials. Additionally, operations to repatriate corruption suspects who had fled abroad (Fox Hunt, Sky Net) were launched.					
Content – Objectives	Deterring corruption, ensuring party discipline and legitimacy, holding elites accountable, and repatriating suspects who had fled abroad. The campaign was also interpreted as a political tool for party leadership.					
Methods / implementation	The involvement of central disciplinary bodies (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), National Supervision Commission (NSC)). Fox Hunt and Sky Net operations targeting individuals who had fled abroad. Oversight extending to private sector actors outside the Party and state.					
Importance / Impact	In today's China, it is of great importance both for internal political power and for public support and state legitimacy. The campaign changed the internal party balance and affected a wide range of areas, including senior officials.					

However, this local-level struggle needed to expand to an international dimension in response to the rise of corruption cases that transcend national borders. In this context, Xi Jinping launched a larger anti-corruption campaign aimed at expanding the local success of the “Tigers and Flies” campaign to the international level. Indeed, political leaders and businesspeople involved in corruption within the country fled abroad when their corrupt activities were uncovered. This situation has become one of China's greatest challenges in combating corruption, as the escape of offenders abroad hindered the enforcement of anti-corruption measures and the administration of justice. As a symbol of his determination to fight corruption, Xi initiated the “Fox Hunt” campaign in 2014 and the “Sky Net” campaign in 2015 as part of international cooperation efforts. These two new campaigns aim to create an operational international model targeting party dissidents, activists, fugitives, and businesspeople accused of corruption who reside overseas.

**Table 3. Impact Of Anti-Corruption Campaign On Top Government Officials (2012–2021).**

Position	No. of Officials		No. of officials convicted of corruption		Percentage of officials convicted of corruption per year		
	Principal	Deputy	Principal	Deputy	Principal	Deputy	Total
National Leaders	12	65	1	6	0.8%	0.9%	0.9%
Departmental leaders of the State Council	41	177	5	17	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%
Provincial Leaders	124	756	10	92	0.8%	1.2%	1.2%
Prefecture Leaders	1332	–	62	–	0.5%	–	0.5%

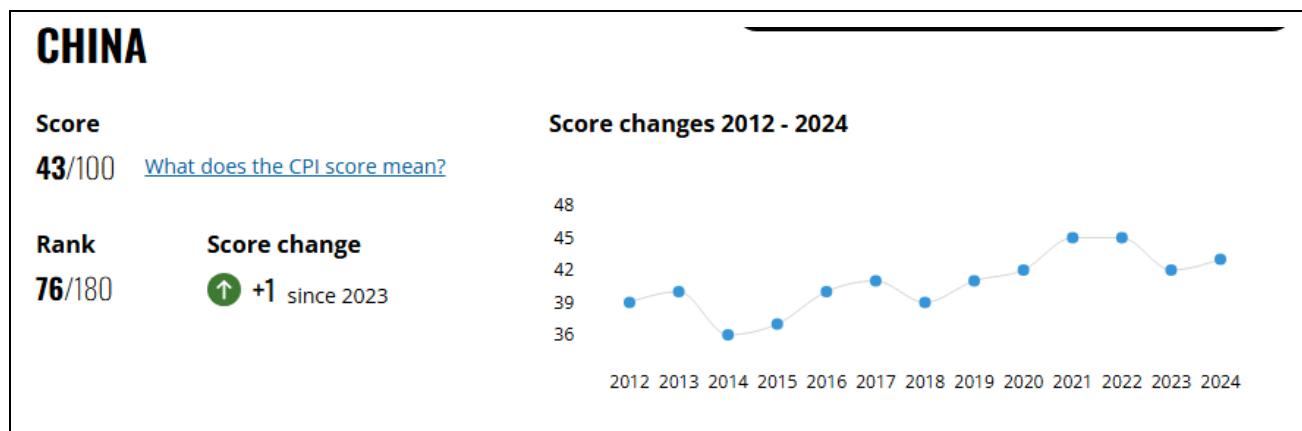
**Source:** Li, Y., Milanovic, B., & Lin, Y. (2024). Anti-corruption campaign in China: An empirical investigation. European Journal of Political Economy, 85, 102559. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2024.102559>

Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign has become effective globally, strengthening the internal discipline of the Communist Party of China while also developing a comprehensive strategy against international corruption networks (Zhu & Wen, 2022: 1002).

Xi Jinping ensured that senior Communist Party officials, whom he labeled as “tigers,” were prosecuted within the framework of anti-corruption investigations. As part of the anti-corruption campaigns launched between 2012-2014 and in 2015, former Director of the Communist Party Central Office Ling Jihua, former Vice Minister of the Central Military Commission and retired General Xu Caihou, former member of the Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee and former Minister of Public Security Zhou Yongkang, and former Politburo member and Minister of Agriculture Sun Zhengcai were tried and punished. Ling Jihua and Xu Caihou were prosecuted in 2014 for corruption. Xu Caihou died of cancer in 2015, while Ling Jihua was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2016 for accepting bribes and abuse of state power. Ling Jihua, who was a former chief advisor to Chinese President Hu Jintao, was also seen as a part of Xi Jinping's strategy to eliminate political rivals (Fabre, 2017).

Zhou Yongkang is the most significant high-ranking official involved in corruption in modern Chinese history. This significance is directly linked to his position. As the head of the Ministry of Public Security, his role required the investigation, prosecution, and trial of corruption offenses; however, he was deeply involved in corruption, which has been one of China's chronic problems throughout history. When he was arrested in 2014, the Beijing administration confiscated assets worth 14 billion dollars belonging to his family members and associates. This is one of the largest corruption cases in Chinese history. During the investigation, it was revealed that Zhou committed crimes including establishing illegal social networks under the guanxi system across different regions, engaging in illegal oil trading, and placing family members in critical government positions. Such a corruption network not only led to personal enrichment but also directly affected the state machinery and disrupted the functioning of the system. This case is considered one of the most important in Xi Jinping's major anti-corruption purge (Zhu, 2017: 14). Sun Zhengcai, a member of the Communist Party Politburo and one of the future strongest presidential candidates in Chinese political history, was investigated by the Communist Party's Discipline Inspection Commission (CCDI) in 2017 and expelled from the party. He was found guilty of accepting bribes and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The case is notable not only as part of the anti-corruption efforts but also as part of Xi Jinping's strategy to eliminate political rivals (Gao, 2017). Apart from all these internal prosecutions, Xi Jinping has ensured that politicians accused of corruption who fled abroad are brought back to China through international cooperation. In this context, Yang Xiuzhu, the former deputy mayor of Wenzhou city in East China, fled China in 2003 before facing trial for corruption charges. Xiuzhu, who resided in the United States, was brought back to China in 2016 through a successful operation. Listed among China's 100 most wanted individuals, Xiuzhu admitted her crime and was found to have committed corruption amounting to 40 million dollars (China Daily, 2015). Guo Jiefang, a police officer working in the traffic department of the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau, fled China in 2000 following corruption allegations. Wanted by Interpol, Jiefang was brought back to China in 2023 (China Daily, 2023). Assessing whether Xi Jinping's anti-corruption policy has been successful or not can be supported by the number of cases prosecuted. While the abundance of such cases highlights the importance of the campaign, what is truly significant is the policy's impact as reflected in the Corruption Perceptions Index.



**Figure 1. Corruption Perceptions Index, 2024**

Source: Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024/index/chn>

The Corruption Perceptions Index scores and ranks countries based on the perceived level of public sector corruption. A score of 0 indicates the worst corruption perception, whereas a score of 100 indicates the cleanest country (Transparency International, 2024). According to the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report by Transparency International, China scored 43 out of 100 and ranked 76th among 180 countries. This score represents an increase from 36 points in 2014, when Xi Jinping assumed office and China was ranked 100th. Over the past decade, China's CPI score improved by 7 points, elevating its position to 76th place (Transparency International, 2024). Although this increase may seem modest in quantitative terms, it reflects a significant qualitative impact resulting from Xi Jinping's comprehensive reforms and uncompromising anti-corruption campaign specific to China. According to the Ministry of Public Security, in 2019, public security organs across China filed and investigated approximately 159,000 economic crime cases, recovering around 100 billion yuan (approximately 14 billion USD) for the national economy (China Daily, 2020). Furthermore, based on official 2024 data, the Ministry reported that Chinese police resolved 78,000 economic crime cases causing financial losses exceeding 800 billion yuan (approximately 111.3 billion USD) (Qingyun, 2025). Within this context, it can be observed that Xi Jinping's anti-corruption policies have been effective. However, despite the policy's successes, corruption persists in China. Completely eradicating corruption within a decade appears unrealistic.

Given the entrenched guanxi system and the involvement of high-ranking party officials in corrupt activities, the total elimination of corruption in China may not be feasible; nevertheless, it is possible to reduce corruption levels.

### Conclusion and Evaluation

Without laws, no state can maintain social order. Therefore, as the highest authority, the state imposes a set of commands and prohibitions on all individuals constituting society to ensure social order. Commands refer to the rules that individuals must comply with, while prohibitions denote the avoidance of crimes that would disrupt social order. In this context, politicians play a significant role in the enforcement of these commands and prohibitions. Laws enacted by politicians are implemented by law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. In modern Chinese history, strong leaders have pursued various policies to combat corruption and prevent corrupt practices. Each leader has assessed the shortcomings of the policies applied during their predecessors' eras and introduced stricter measures and laws in subsequent periods. Within this framework, the most comprehensive and effective anti-corruption efforts in modern Chinese history were initiated during the era of founding leader Mao Zedong. Subsequent leaders continued this struggle with their own approaches, and during Xi Jinping's tenure, anti-corruption policies reached a new dimension. Xi Jinping did not limit the fight against corruption to the local level but extended it to the international arena to prosecute individuals involved in corruption who fled abroad. In this regard, China has collaborated with other countries to facilitate the extradition and trial of offenders. According to data from Transparency International, as a result of China's determined and consistent policies, the country has shown improvement in its Corruption Perceptions Index.

This situation demonstrates that Xi Jinping's anti-corruption policies constitute a strong and consistent approach within the Chinese context, achieving notable success in combating corruption. However, despite the implementation of stringent and radical measures, incidents of corruption continue to occur in China. Therefore, proposing a definitive solution or policy to completely eradicate corruption remains a significant challenge. Considering that corruption persists even in democratic countries where the rule of law is firmly established, it is evident that corruption is a global issue. In this regard, although corruption has been substantially suppressed in China, its total elimination appears highly difficult. Xi Jinping has implemented these reforms not only through political will but also by strengthening the legal system. The fight against corruption has been reinforced through decisive actions such as the prosecution of high-profile political leaders, government officials, and bureaucrats. China's legal system has enabled the government to use the rule of law as an effective tool in pursuing these policies, thereby enhancing the legal infrastructure for anti-corruption efforts. While improvements in the Corruption Perceptions Index indicate a reduction in corruption within the system, corruption remains a widespread problem. This underscores that anti-corruption efforts in China constitute a long-term process, requiring continuous measures alongside the existing reforms. Although the reforms under Xi Jinping's leadership represent important steps toward reducing the scale of corruption, ongoing and more comprehensive reforms are necessary to achieve lasting and effective solutions.

In conclusion, this study highlights the historical evolution of anti-corruption efforts in China, emphasizing the structural and implementation differences between the policies of Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping. The findings suggest that Mao's policies relied on centralized and ideologically driven approaches, achieving short-term results through party discipline and strong state interventions despite a relatively limited legal infrastructure. In contrast, Xi Jinping's policies were reinforced by legal reforms, yielding short-term successes while shaping long-term strategic frameworks, and extending anti-corruption measures internationally to ensure the prosecution of all offenders. Nevertheless, the persistence of corruption indicates that ongoing and comprehensive measures remain necessary. This study is expected to contribute to the literature as one of the research studies examining China's anti-corruption processes from a comprehensive legal and political perspective. In this context, it serves as an important reference source for academics, policymakers, and legal professionals seeking to understand the effectiveness and dynamics of China's anti-corruption policies. In the future, to ensure the sustainability of anti-corruption efforts, it is recommended to strengthen the legal framework, implement reforms consistently, increase international cooperation, and, especially in the Chinese context, introduce strong political reforms to effectively combat corruption, considering that most of those involved in corruption are usually politicians. In this way, the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies can be enhanced both in China and in other countries.

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