

The New Normal: Reform, Information, and China's Anti-Corruption Crusade in Context

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Abstract:

Why do some authoritarian regimes transform their political and economic systems? China's leaders are reshaping the country's politics and economy through massive efforts on anti-corruption, centralization, and official calls for governing according to Chinese moral traditions. In this paper, I provide a theoretical framework arising from authoritarian information problems for the rise of the new normal and analyze its causes using policy statements and data on anti-corruption cases. The paper explicates two modes of Reform Era governance: a technocratic mode and a neopolitical mode. The former, which dominated until 2012, fostered growth via decentralization and relatively weak monitoring of local officials, producing tremendous economic vitality as officials accepted the tradeoff between total control under the prior planned economy to partial control of a larger pie and side payments with the emergence of markets. The accumulating costs of the technocratic mode's economic and political pathologies have motivated a decision to alter course, increasing monitoring of locals and promoting official morality among the officers of the party-state.

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Why do some authoritarian regimes transform their political and economic systems? While small adjustments are ubiquitous, substantial moves to alter the status quo can be destabilizing.¹ Why do regimes undertake such risks in the realm of mass politics when most authoritarian regimes are removed by other elites (Carles Boix & Svobik, 2013; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Svobik, 2012)? Proximate risks to authoritarian regimes may come in the form of coups or intra-elite maneuvers, but elite politics is shaped by the relationship between the regime and the population, including the economic, social, and political context. I develop these arguments through exploring recent changes in China's political system.²

In the past few years, politics in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been remade. The Chinese regime is shifting its mix of strategies away from a technocratic mode where numbers dominate and the institutions of control attempt to be invisible to a new more politicized time.³ Both institutional and rhetorical changes characterize this neopolitical "new normal (新常态)," which coincides with Xi Jinping's rise to the top of the party-state hierarchy. The centralization of political authority in the Party's anti-corruption unit, the Central Commission on Discipline Inspection (CCDI), is accompanied by complaints against officials airing publicly, commercial and state-run media broadcasting cadres' self-criticisms, and leaders pushing to imbue officialdom with traditional morals.⁴ How and why has China changed political modes at this time and in this fashion?⁵

¹ E.g. (Solnick, 1998)

² A large literature on China's "Reform Era," of course, exists

³ Although the populace-facing local governments are bound to fail to remain unseen, and, of course, do not help themselves on this score in their building of grandiose monuments to their own power and for their own comforts. For examples of such grandiose buildings, see (Kuo & Watts, 2013).

⁴ See (Xinhua, 2013a, 2013b) on official statements about the anti-corruption and morals campaigns. See (Demick, 2013) on self-criticisms being aired on Chinese TV. The centralization appears to be centralized in Beijing rather than being a boon for provincial governments as was a previous moment's "soft centralization" (A. C. Mertha, 2005). For a discussion of my use of the expression "political mode," see below. Traditional here refers to a blend of Maoist and Imperial political thought.

⁵ "Political mode" is used as other terms either overstate or undersell the changes. "Era" is too strong; equating these changes with those between China's Mao and Reform Eras is presumptive. "Regime change" ignores the continuity of personnel. "Style" ignores institutional developments and is used elsewhere in this political rearrangement. "Centralization" ignores the changing ideological vision and the shift from metric to process based governance. I describe this choice of terminology more below.

I argue that information problems play a key role in understanding this transition, as the actions both of elite rivals and of local officials operating in the decentralized, low-information environment have become untenable for Beijing due to economic and political risks accumulated under the technocratic mode. The center has used a pressing problem—pervasive corruption—as justification for a suite of changes to the Chinese political system. First, I present a theoretical account of authoritarian information problems and political control as a joint problem at the intersection of mass and elite politics. Then I describe China’s transition between these two modes. Finally, I present evidence, including an analysis of anti-corruption investigations, demonstrating support for my account of the new normal over rivals.

Masses and Elites in Authoritarian Politics

In popular media and much of the social science literature, the principal threat facing dictators is an anti-regime population revolting *en masse*.⁶ While compelling, this image does not comport with the majority of authoritarian regimes ending not through rebellion but replacement by other elites, particularly coups or other members of the selectorate (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003; Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2012; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Roeder, 1993; Shirk, 1993). As such, most recent work on nondemocratic politics focuses on elite politics, typologies, and institutions that facilitate solutions to what Svobik deems the “problem of authoritarian power-sharing,” which is mainly modeled as an information problem for the leader and other regime elites (Svobik, 2012).

Even when turning to discuss mass politics or “the problem of authoritarian control,” the crux of the content remains intra-elite.⁷ The discussion of authoritarian control is principally focused on the dangers fraught with empowering a military being weighed against the challenges of controlling a population without doing so. Similarly, authoritarian parties are important political actors less because of their ability to penetrate the society and economy but rather because their institutions induce “sunk political investment” by junior officials who pay costs early in their careers with the promise that they will reap the rewards as they are promoted up the chain of command, insuring “party-based co-optation” that should be more successful than simple transfers. Svobik acknowledges that these institutions of authoritarian parties also aid authoritarian regime resilience through a separate mechanism that he terms “direct political control,”

⁶ E.g. (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; C. Boix, 2003; Kuran, 1991).

⁷ (Svobik, 2012)

This mechanism refers to those aspects of party activity that are aimed primarily at the general population, such as political communication, mobilization, intelligence gathering, and maintenance of political discipline. (Svolik 2012, 164)⁸

I argue that the question of why regimes transform their economic and political systems requires focus on these core elements of mass political control.

While elites may ultimately replace dictators, mass politics shapes elite politics. Even basic differences across regimes such as capital city size and the concentration of urbanization alter their hazard rates through both urban rebellions and intra-elite coups (Wallace, 2013, 2014). Mass politics, or state-society relations as it is often referred to in the Chinese literature, crucially factors into both the possibility of revolution but also in the character of intra-elite politics. In other words, while coups are proximate causes of regime deaths, mass politics is the underlying context that can make a regime susceptible, allowing an ambitious colonel to consider such a move, and elites willing to side with this new leader over the old one.⁹

This paper then focuses on the content of non-elite politics in authoritarian regimes and incentives to shift their mass-facing strategies. In particular, I build on arguments addressing solutions that work in the short-run but subvert an authoritarian regime over time (Bunce, 1985, 1999). The Chinese regime has undertaken a series of major political maneuvers in the past few years.¹⁰ While many domestic and foreign thinkers have enumerated challenges facing the regimes and posed policy options to address those challenges, none prefigured the extent and character of changes that are reshaping China, the creation of a new normal.¹¹ To establish China's altered trajectory requires knowing where it has been, in this case describing the *modus operandi* of the technocratic mode.

On Political Modes

⁸ Ideology, or ideological affinity, comes into Svolik's analysis as distributed amongst the population *ex ante*, with the authoritarian party selectively recruiting allies with ideological ideal points close to its own, thereby also marginalizing potential opponents (pp. 182-3).

⁹ See Wallace 2014, chapters two and three, for more detail.

¹⁰ Of note is that these changes are to the political system as a whole rather than the policy-making or implementing apparatus. Indeed, it is unclear how and to what extent these major political changes will change China's fragmented authoritarianism in policy-making (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1990; A. Mertha, 2009).

¹¹ For instance, (Shirk, 2008; Slater & Wong, 2013; World Bank, 2012) and the variety of writers profiled in the China 3.0 volume.

Why use the term “political mode” to separate the Reform Era China into technocratic and neopolitical modes? The alternatives are inadequate simplifications of the multi-dimensional nature of the changes or overstated. The new normal in the political realm reflects significant alteration in the political system’s (1) institutionalization and (2) justification discourse, while at the same time keeping the same individuals in power. As such, other terms or phrases used to describe substantial political changes in nondemocratic contexts are imprecise or inappropriate. The recent shift is not:

1. A regime change, in the sense that it is the same individuals leading the same institutions, albeit reconfigured with some offices strengthened and others weakened.
2. A new era, as the changes happening now are not as dramatic as those differences between Maoist China and the post-Mao Reform era.¹²
3. A political style, as significant institutional reconfigurations of power relations are taking place that are more than simply stylistic differences with the previous mode. Additionally, the term “work style” has a separate meaning in this context, referring to the problematic “work styles” of Chinese bureaucrats.
4. Simply centralization, as there is a shift not only in power between levels but also in the conduct of the regime—in words and actions—compared with the prior mode that centralization fails to reflect.

A change in political mode reflects that while the regime continues, the power dynamics inside and the legitimation strategies internally and externally have shifted.

The Technocratic Mode

The Reform Era’s first mode was technocratic.¹³ While significant in-fighting between elites existed and political networks built relationships, the dominant form of state speech and policy pronouncements took the form of reciting statistics displaying the development and grandeur of China’s economy.¹⁴ Take, for example, former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s final Government Work Report (政府工作报告),

¹² Minzner takes the other side, emphasizing the distinctions as the end of the Reform Era (C. Minzner, 2014).

¹³ It also, as is described below, is anti-political. On “development” as an anti-political force, see (Ferguson, 1994). The technocratic mode of course had political content and outcomes; it was comparatively apolitical in that it attempted to push politics aside as to why decisions were being made.

¹⁴ On factions, see (V. Shih, Adolph, & Liu, 2012; V. C. Shih, 2009), among others.

delivered on 5 March 2013 before an audience of thousands of National People's Congress (NPC) deputies.¹⁵ He summarized numerous successes that had occurred in China during the past five years: total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) moving up to rank second globally; government revenue increasing from 5.1 to 11.7 trillion *yuan*; per capita disposable income of urban residents rising by 8.8% annually and for rural residents by 9.9%; and grain output growing for the ninth consecutive year.¹⁶ Premier Wen continued at length explicating the successes of the previous administration and laying out the tasks for the future, but at no point did he mention any individuals—neither elite politicians nor citizens—until his final sentence, which included a reference to “the [incoming] leadership of the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as General Secretary.”¹⁷ The politicians and party pursuing these policies faded into the background during the Reform Era's technocratic mode.

China's Reform Era is generally counted as starting with the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978, when a combination of factors—the reversal of verdicts for leaders purged during the Cultural Revolution, economic troubles, and support for “seeking truth from facts”—all signaled the beginning of the end for Mao's designated successor, Hua Guofeng.¹⁸ The tumult of Mao's radical leftist rule and the espoused pragmatism of newly re-empowered Deng Xiaoping—as seen in his invocation that “it doesn't matter if a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice” in a July 1962 speech on reviving agricultural production in the wake of the Great Leap Forward¹⁹—pointed to a diminished role for revolutionary rhetoric and indeed for communist ideology in this new era.

After Chairman Mao's death, China would be governed differently and with a new kind of cadre coming to the fore, the technocrat. Deng pushed the party to stop using the previously potent label “rightist” and opposed the “overextension of class

¹⁵ http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/WenWorkReport_Eng_2013.pdf; http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/WenWorkReport_Chn_2013.pdf

¹⁶ http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/WenWorkReport_Eng_2013.pdf, p. 2.

¹⁷ Deng Xiaoping theory is also mentioned, invoking the individual but fundamentally reciting a litany of preceding ideologies.

¹⁸ Among others, see (Buckley, 2013; Naughton, 1993; Schram, 1984; Teiwes, 2014). The changes that separate the Mao and Reform eras both predate and postdate these meetings, but it has become the marker for the beginning of the Reform Era with the Mao era ending with the Chairman's death in September 1976. Among ironies, the economic troubles of 1977 and 1978 that redounded to harm Hua and help Deng in part were due to the implementation of an economic plan that Deng had overseen as Vice Premier in 1975 (Naughton, 1993, pp. 499–500).

¹⁹ Deng 1962, as cited in (Naughton, 1993).

struggle.”²⁰ Other leaders in the early reform period argued that rule through economic development as achieved by technocratic pragmatism required officials to be trained specialists, not ideologues.²¹

This transition from Maoist ideology to the technocratic Reform Era encountered serious political difficulties. In 1981, the Party published the “Resolution on CPC History,” admitting to past errors and laying the blame for such errors on Mao’s shoulders ((CCP), 1981). Striking the proper balance between praise and criticism of the prior era was hard given Mao’s position as both hero of the civil war against the Nationalists and the leader of a personality cult bent to destroying the CCP itself, as seen in Deng’s notes on successive drafts of the resolution.²²

Reforms faced difficulties at the grassroots level as well. Economic reforms began in the countryside, where some cadres feared the distancing of policy from Maoist ideals would increase inequality and polarization, as well as possibly leading to the return of landlords.²³ Reformers pushed for households first to receive bonuses for their individual efforts to provide incentives for additional labor and eventually to allocate land to families to give further incentives for efforts and investments.²⁴ Some resisted these policies because they were unwilling or too cautious to move so far down what looked like a capitalist road.²⁵ But others resisted or dragged their feet since the household responsibility system and marketization more generally shifted the power structure in the countryside. Decollectivization of agriculture also cut off revenue streams from local leaders, who—particularly at the village level—went from ordering

²⁰ (Lee, 1991, pp. 185–188)

²¹ Hu Yaobang 1983, as cited in (Cheng & White, 1990).

²² ((CCP), 1981; Deng, 1981). Or as it has been put elsewhere, Mao was the CCP’s Lenin and Stalin. Of course, not all cadres suffered during the Cultural Revolution, even after the Gang of Four’s ouster in October 1978, a good number of high ranking officials in the party were “beneficiaries” of the turmoil. The sidelining of these officials was also politically problematic (Lee, 1991, pp. 245–253). History continues to be written and rewritten, as evidenced by recent party promotion of shoddy scholarship alleging that far fewer died in the Great Leap Forward than the 30 million plus usually estimated (Garnaut, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Deng’s participation during these Maoist disasters also complicated the writing of the official narratives as Deng had clear conflicts of interest.

²³ (Zweig, 1983)

²⁴ (Tsou, Blecher, & Meisner, 1982). There remains a significant debate regarding the extent to which the rural reforms culminating in the Household Responsibility System were caused by bottom-up revolt against the state’s control versus top-down initiatives. While the broader project is sympathetic to the notion of the state’s inability to monitor and control everywhere, the discussion here focuses on the intra-party-state narratives, which are mostly top-down.

²⁵ See, for instance, (Zweig, 1983, 1986).

all economic and political efforts of the collective to overseeing a community.²⁶ While their control over the agricultural work of the village was declining, however, local officials latched onto a new opportunity and fostered an explosion of rural industry.²⁷ Some officials took advantage of their positions and extracted value out of these enterprises for personal gain, while others facilitated the development of these enterprises in a less corrupt manner. The lack of monitoring from higher levels gave local governments significant room to maneuver in ways that greased the wheels of marketization, as officials accepted the hand that was dealt of less influence over a larger pie.²⁸

Even the Tiananmen protests—likely the closest that the regime has come to losing power since the start of the Reform Era—were made more likely by the transition from Mao to Reform eras. While the national economy had grown with rapidity in GDP terms in the 1980s, many workers and students in China’s cities resented the inflation eating away at their real incomes, increasing sense of relative deprivation as others moved ahead more quickly than them, and a decline in the party’s prestige and presence in their lives.²⁹ As the party-state found itself unable to inspire as it withered in the wake of the de-emphasis on ideology, individuals frustrated with their present and unexcited by their future prospects expressed their reservations about the country’s direction. Ultimately, repression in the form of gunfire and People’s Liberation Army tanks cleared the streets of demonstrators. The post-Tiananmen period saw a reversal from the economic reforms of the 1980s until Deng’s Southern Tour in 1992.

After the Tiananmen interlude, technocratic politics dominated a complete overhaul of the domestic and global perception of China and the Chinese regime, as problems were solved through the unseen hands of “efficiency” and “reform.” Such emphasis was placed on technical expertise that “in 1997, when all seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee formed that year had degrees in the sciences or

²⁶ (Nee, 1989). Nee argued that the power of local officials would ebb as market incentives shifted power to producers but was sanguine on officials’ acquiescence to this eventuality.

²⁷ A serious debate has emerged on the nature of the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) that were critical to rural industrial growth in China during the 1980s, with Oi and Naughton presenting the standard view—particularly Oi’s “local state corporatism”—contrasting with Huang’s view of TVEs as overwhelmingly private rather than owned and operated by local states. See (Huang, 2008; Naughton, 2007; Oi, 1999).

²⁸ It is obviously not simply exploitive corruption but real development (often with officials taking the lead and personally profiting while benefitting their localities) that is taking place (Oi, 1999).

²⁹ (Walder, 1991; Zhao, 2001).

engineering.”³⁰ During this period, the political base of the regime shifted from urban industrial workers to include capitalists and intellectuals (Solinger, 2003; Yang, 2006). These two populations that had been targets of political campaigns under Mao became crucial to the Party which now represented them, coopting these potentially threatening groups before any trouble arose (Tiewes, 1997).

The numbers that described the system’s successes—“three decades of double digit GDP growth” and similar accounts became central to the regime’s justification strategy. The system appeared to be governed by the numbers themselves: that maximizing the correct numbers to the correct amounts at the correct moments will lead to political promotions for individuals, success for the nation, prosperity for the population, and stability for the party-state.

In the technocratic mode, local government or party-state officials are embedded in a competition over figures in spreadsheets. Simplifying the complexities of local performance made localities legible to the center but came with numerous perverse consequences.³¹ The Cadre Evaluation System (干部考核制度) is a system of quantitative metrics or targets by which higher-ups can measure local economic and political performance, and reward (or punish) officials based upon such figures.³² Different targets are seen as more or less critical, hard and soft targets respectively, as well as particular items of singular import—one-item vetoes—which historically have included population growth (via birth rate rather than in-migration, a one-child policy issue) and social stability (with eruptions of instability torpedoing promotions).³³ The system channeled discontent into “rightful resistance,” which blamed local officials for problems and called on higher levels to ride to the rescue.³⁴

There are scholarly debates about the extent to which numbers cause promotions (and which numbers matter³⁵), or to put it differently, the extent to which the figures that fed into the cadre evaluation system dominated the patterns of promotions inside the party-state hierarchy.³⁶ However, even those who see non-numerical pieces (i.e.

³⁰ “The clout of technocrats reached a pinnacle in 1997, when all seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee formed that year had degrees in the sciences or engineering.” (R. Li, 2012). One could go on, delving into the implications of Jiang’s Three Represents.

³¹ On legibility, see (Scott, 1998). For examples of local political machinations in China, see (Smith, 2009).

³² E.g., (Birney, 2014; Edin, 2003; C. F. Minzner, 2009; Wang, 2013; Whiting, 2000).

³³ E.g., (Ong, 2012).

³⁴ (L. Li & O’Brien, 1996; O’Brien & Li, 2006).

³⁵ (Lü & Landry, 2012)

³⁶ E.g., (Edin, 2003; Landry, 2008; Lü & Landry, 2012; V. Shih et al., 2012; Whiting, 2000).

factions or networks) as critical to promotions concede that these numbers do aid in accounting for who moves up the chain of command.³⁷

At the same time, however, the combination of the significance of a few particular indicators and the general lack of monitoring creates incentives for lower level officials to manipulate these indicators. In a report released by Wikileaks, then executive vice premier Li Keqiang noted his skepticism of official GDP figures from lower level governments as “man-made,” “unreliable,” and “for reference only.”³⁸ Systematic evaluation of GDP growth measures at the provincial level also points towards officials “joking the stats,” as growth in GDP exceeds growth rates in other close correlates at moments of political significance such as turnovers.³⁹ Air quality statistics have also come under scrutiny as discrepancies between official and unofficial measurements come to light and photographs reveal that “blue sky days” fail to require a sky resembling the color blue.⁴⁰

Transition to a Neopolitical Mode

The regime has shifted its mix of strategies, yet in some ways the new system may not look so different at first glance.⁴¹ Indeed, despite the regime itself as well as commentators declaring a “new normal (新常态),” it is possible that its status as a different mode for the political economy of China is an overstatement based on extrapolation rather than simply observing what has already transpired. The language of a dichotomous change in political mode simplifies a more complex shift in the mixture of the regime’s legitimation and justification strategies as well as changes in its institutions. Nonetheless, the paths of these two modes have diverged substantially if not definitively.⁴² The core differences are an institutionalized centralization of political authority and changes in how the regime justifies itself to different audiences. I lay out these differences below.

³⁷ One prominent example is (V. Shih et al., 2012).

³⁸ Wikileaks, Cable 07BEIJING1760, 15 March 2007

³⁹ (Wallace, n.d.). For evidence of village-level officials manipulating statistics, see (Tsai, 2008).

⁴⁰ See, for example, (Andrews, 2013; Demick, 2011). For academic work, see (Oliver, 2011).

⁴¹ Obviously views differ on this point, from those emphasizing continuity, such as (Lardy, 2014; Shen, 2014), to those emphasizing differences, such as (C. Minzner, 2014).

⁴² Minzner 2014 is the most definitive.

The first difference has been a substantial centralization of power.⁴³ The centralization's most important and noted component is the increased activity and prominence of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).⁴⁴ While the CCDI operated prior to this period, its efforts were not as pervasive, feared, or commented upon as under Wang Qishan during the anti-corruption "campaign," which has also targeted more and higher-level officials than previous efforts in the reform era.⁴⁵ These anti-corruption activities represent a centralization of power because they expand the auditing of local governments, officials, bureaucrats, and firms by central authorities to a greater extent and with more independence than previously occurred. The CCDI has opened new offices at local levels and their place in the political hierarchy in localities has increased by making their leaders responsible to central authorities instead of only the local party committee.⁴⁶ The party's principal actors in Beijing are increasing their monitoring activities over their agents in the provinces, cities, and counties of China.

The centralization of authority even can be seen in policy dimensions that at first appear relatively distant from organizational issues, such as urbanization policy. The CCP-led regime has managed urbanization throughout its reign, promoting urban stability and attempting to restrict migration to and the size of the country's largest cities.⁴⁷ However, in recent years, there has been a push in the opposite direction, towards building true megacities in and around Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Yet this push appears to be more related to the desire for increased central control—assaulting the "fortress economies" of the different regions—than purely about urban planning.⁴⁸ As Zhang Gui, an researcher at Hebei Technology University put it, "Right

⁴³ Whether or not there has been centralization within the Politburo Standing Committee, as some argue and others question, remains to be seen. Although the extent to which outsiders will ever know the "truth" of such dynamics is limited at best. On difficulties of assessing elite politics in China, see (Teiwes, 2014).

⁴⁴ Sometimes abbreviated as CDIC.

⁴⁵ "Campaign" is placed in quotes as it seems to be something of more permanence—something institutionalized—rather than a temporary campaign; the term "crusade" is also used. Higher level targets include Zhou Yongkang, former Politburo Standing Committee member and Xu Caihou, former Politburo member and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (Barreda & Yan, 2014; Caixin, 2014; "Zhou Yongkang's Downfall," 2014).

⁴⁶ (D. Zhou, 2014)

⁴⁷ For more on China's management of urbanization, see (Wallace, 2014).

⁴⁸ (Reuters, 2014).

now, every official will think of his own region first – from the construction of projects to investment,” since heretofore officials had been judged primarily on such metrics.⁴⁹

A second difference between the two modes can be seen in the increased importance of party over state organs, as exemplifying the rise of the political over the technocratic. The CCDI’s increased role as the principal actor of centralization is particularly fascinating because it is a party rather than a state organ, making the prospect of a rule of law that constrains the CCP even more unlikely in the near term. The 4th Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in October 2014 pointed towards the heightened position of the party and the center’s efforts to monitor and control local officials through the legal system. The official communique from the plenum called for concrete steps that should allow judges to hold local officials more accountable for their actions (“Official Central Committee Communiqué on 4th Plenum,” n.d.).⁵⁰ In particular, the creation of circuit courts and regional courts with jurisdictions across extant subnational borders should give judges room to rule against local leaders without putting the court’s resources and their own salaries at risk. That is, while the reform of the legal system and other state institutions fits with the centralizing thread of politicized new normal, the CCDI and reinvigoration of party institutions reflects a break from the practices of the past thirty years of reform.

The neopolitical mode and the prior technocratic mode also differ with the regime’s new public and explicit calls to justify its rule on traditional morality.⁵¹ This can be seen by examining the Mass Line (群众路线) campaign. The goal of Xi’s campaign—and his personal image has been closely tied to it⁵²—is to rectify “four undesirable work styles” of Chinese local officials: “formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance.”⁵³ High

⁴⁹ (Reuters, 2014). The piece goes on to argue: “They [experts] say China’s “every region for itself” approach to economic growth is a cause of a wide variety of problems, including overinvestment, pollution and corruption.” Others have also noted that urbanization and metropolitan planning has become a battlefield for inter-level conflict in some provinces, as each attempts to claim turf (Jaros 2014).

⁵⁰ Members of the CCDI standing committee attended the 4th plenum as non-voting delegates.

⁵¹ Mixing Maoist and Imperial (principally Confucian but also Legalist) ideals of behavior is fascinating since so much of Mao’s thought went in to criticizing the problems associated with the old society’s Confucianism and the inequality that it perpetuated and justified. Their fusion appears on its way to becoming an “invented tradition” (Ranger & Hobsbawm, 1983).

⁵² See, for instance, (Xinhua, 2014a). Interestingly, some argue that the style and operations of Xi’s mass line campaign are actually following Bo Xilai’s mass line program in Chongqing before he was toppled (Downie, 2014).

⁵³ (Xinhua, 2014b).

provincial officials, as well as those of lower ranks, ate and lived in the homes of local residents to increase their connections with the lives of those in their jurisdictions.⁵⁴ They also engaged in self-criticisms that were broadcast on national television; Hebei's party secretary Zhou Benshun stated, "I cared very much about development speed and economic volumes but not as much about people's own interests."⁵⁵ This self-criticism's content is also instructive, pointing to an official recognition of the disconnect between economic aggregates and the everyday lives of Chinese. Public discussion of the political failings of leaders who remain in office was extremely rare during the Reform Era's first three decades.

Fighting hedonism and extravagance has become a major point in these changes; the imposed austerity of governmental officials is referred to by the expression "four dishes, one soup" after a simple meal that Xi ate in Hebei's Fuping county.⁵⁶ This simple meal differs greatly from the elaborate banquets for officials of local governments, paid for either out of public coffers or by local business leaders and developers to influence policy decisions.

Emphasizing the necessity of local officials to be judged by their morality fits into the centralization efforts as it can inculcate obedience to central dictates and perhaps reduce monitoring costs. It also represents a partial move away from technocratic or scientific measures of performance as a technology of legitimation towards traditionalism, as can be seen in Xi Jinping's calls to Chinese classics in defining virtue.⁵⁷ The change in the regime's public-facing justification discourse is significant as it comes to overshadow the prior almost exclusively implicit justification via performance legitimacy earned through the rapid growth of GDP and other statistics associated with scientific development.

Interestingly, explicit references in the campaign are made to the idea that such changes are not singular or temporary. Xi himself is quoted telling officials that they "should not have the wrong idea that they have passed the test just because the sessions are over."⁵⁸ Indeed, in August 2014, fourteen months after the launch of the campaign,

⁵⁴ (Xinhua Insight, 2013).

⁵⁵ ("Critical masses," 2013)

⁵⁶ ("Four dishes and one soup," 2013). See also ("Xi Eats Plainly Amid Focus on Official Waistlines," 2012).

⁵⁷ E.g. (Tatlow, 2014).

⁵⁸ (Xinhua Insight, 2013).

the regime promulgated further details about reinvigorating the implementation of anti-corruption measures.⁵⁹

The changes between the prior technocratic and current neopolitical mode are numerous and significant. Institutionalized authority has been centralized through the expansion and increased prominence of the CCDI. The elite bargain that seemed to protect officials of high rank from investigation has been shaken up. The system of assessments for local officials has been changed. Political discussions, including self-criticisms, have been broadcast on various Chinese media. Both Maoism and classical Chinese political rhetoric and ideology have returned to the scene with both portrayed positively as a way of judging officials and the regime as a whole.⁶⁰

Transition and Transformation of China's Growth Model

Why has this neopolitical mode emerged in the PRC under Xi Jinping? The new normal represents both an attempt to fix the technocratic mode's pathologies as well as to hedge against the possibility of an end to strong economic performance by constructing of an alternative narrative to justify the regime based on Chinese tradition and moral uprightness.⁶¹ The center is increasing its monitoring to better understand the situation in the provinces and control the behavior of local government officials. The utility of the prior technocratic, decentralized, and low information mode has become overwhelmed by its accumulated costs, particularly economic and political risks.⁶²

Maintaining the prior technocratic mode poses economic risks linked to cross-national patterns of regime instability in the face of declining economic growth, the increased scale and significance of local economic decisions as the economy has grown, the decrease in expected returns from investment as its stock of infrastructure has skyrocketed, and the instability associated with altering the country's development path towards consumption and away from investment. Cross-national evidence points to economic growth's significance for explaining authoritarian regime survival.⁶³ If the center believed that local economic mismanagement threatened the overall economic development of the country, then it likely further believed that this threat was an

⁵⁹ (Xinhua, 2014b).

⁶⁰ Minzner 2014 also references the closing off of foreign influences or connections.

⁶¹ Thanks to Ben Lessing for pushing me to clarify on this point.

⁶² To clarify, the center operated with limited information about localities during the technocratic mode; that is, the center judged local performance on a few key metrics rather than with more sustained attention or multi-dimensional assessments.

⁶³ (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Gandhi, 2008; Geddes, 1999; Wallace, 2013, n.d.; Wright, 2008).

existential one given the number of regimes that fall during periods of economic crisis.⁶⁴ This pattern might hold even if national level macroeconomic trends were broadly stable, but in fact general expectations—even official ones from the Party and National Bureau of Statistics—are for falling growth rates in the near term and heading into the future.⁶⁵

Governance in the technocratic mode gave local government officials relatively free hands to do what they wished, initially producing excellent economic growth and true development. However, as time wore on, easy problems were solved and local decisions created inefficiencies and costs. The core constraints on these free hands were the maximization of different statistical indicators of development—both budgetary and extra-budgetary fiscal revenue, GDP, and investment, among others. This mode allowed local officials to enrich themselves and their friends greatly. It also over-produced particular goods and under-produced others as local officials gamed the system; for example, during different periods breweries were desired because of tax rules, and environmental protection was under-supplied throughout.⁶⁶ In addition, as China's economy has grown in size, the scale of local governmental waste has become extraordinary—on the order of tens of billions of dollars; the central government has bailed out local governments, firms, and banks previously, but the additional zeroes involved in such escapades in the current decade makes such rescues extremely dear. Previous bailouts amounted to significant chunks of national GDP. Given China's growth, a bailout of similar share would be substantial in terms of global economic growth and total output.

As China moved from severely under-invested to greater stocks of extant investment, the expectation regarding the share of investments being undertaken that made economic sense decrease.⁶⁷ Even economists sanguine about China's growth prospects, such as Nicholas Lardy, acknowledge overinvestment.⁶⁸ Doomsayers, on the

⁶⁴ This conventional wisdom is supported in the scholarly literature as a consistent and strong positive statistical relationship between regime survival and economic growth.

⁶⁵ E.g. (Davis, 2014).

⁶⁶ See, for example, (A. H. Wedeman, 2003) on beer and other products during price reform from the 1980s through mid-1990s. See, for example, (Wang, 2006, 2013) on environmental degradation as a result of the incentives emerging from the CES.

⁶⁷ Similarly with state planning, expectations of the economic viability of different concerns decreases over time as China's labor costs increase.

⁶⁸ Lardy, China Town Hall, October 2014.

other hand, point to the rise of ghost cities and airports built years ahead of anticipated demand as uneconomical.⁶⁹

China's reliance on investment and exports for growth has long been noted and calls for it to rebalance to a more consumption-based model of economic development have been heard for years.⁷⁰ The neopolitical mode's centralizing efforts increase control over local officials and may produce results where previous episodes of exhortation by Politburo members in Beijing proved insufficient in adjusting local investment behavior.

While it seems that the leash on local states has been tightened, the extent to which the neopolitical mode will rely on the central state or the market to guide economic development remains an open question. Beijing's response to the Great Recession—massive economic stimulus through direct expenditure of state funds and easy loans from banks following policy directives from the center—resulted in the phenomena known as *guojin mintui* (the state moves in, the non-state moves out).⁷¹ While somewhat reversed after the crisis, strengthening the position of national champion SOEs and bending them to do the center's bidding is one method of achieving the desired changes in the domestic economy.⁷² On the other hand, some interpret the aggressive targeting of individuals associated with the "oil clique" as evidence that the regime is in part using the anti-corruption campaign to weaken bastions of resistance to a more free market economic system that might allow less—but more efficient—investment to produce similar rates of growth going forward.⁷³

⁶⁹ E.g. Pettis, Shih, etc. For example, the heavily covered disaster of Ordos, (Sanderson, 2013; X. Zhou, 2013). On the phenomenon of ghost cities more generally, see ("China's Ghost Cities Are About to Get Spookier," 2014). Symbolically, ghost cities are the polar opposites of slums. They demonstrate a capacity and willingness to invest in infrastructure rather than allow individuals to exist without state penetration. However, the emptiness shows waste and problems of decision-making akin to that of slums.

⁷⁰ For instance, (Eurasia Group, 2011). Wen Jiabao in 2007 echoed these comments (IMF Survey, 2007; Wen, 2007).

⁷¹ (Yang, 2012; Yang & Jiang, 2012). This move could represent the beginning of a return to state dominance and guidance, simply a temporary salve in a moment of real potential crisis that does not presage the future direction of policy, or a change that demonstrated the downsides of state (especially local state) economic guidance thus stimulating the current pro-market reforms. In other work, I explore the *guo jin min tui* phenomenon and its subsequent rollback, through in-depth case studies in the coal and airline sectors (Wallace, n.d.).

⁷² On national champions, see (Lin & Milhaupt, 2013).

⁷³ On the oil clique being targeted, see ("His Start in Oil Fuelled Zhou's Rise to Top Cop," n.d.; Page, Spegele, & Ma, 2013). On the broader claim, see (Lardy, 2014).

Political risks of continuing with the technocratic mode compliment the economic risks in pushing for changes. First, moving away from performance-based legitimacy when performance is likely to decline has some obvious logic behind it. Second, the extent of corruption—generally considered pervasive even before the anti-corruption campaign made cases a daily news item—likely undermined public confidence in the regime, diminishing its perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry as well as undermining the actual governing of the country.

The new reality facing local officials appears more complicated. Having accepted scientific measurement of performance into the system's DNA, it is hard to remove, even with the various pathologies already discussed. Rather than ceasing to use quantitative measures, the system is moving in two directions. First is a move to diversify the number of different measures used to evaluate officials.⁷⁴ In September, the National Bureau of Statistics released a list of forty indicators that would help to end the reign of "GDP Supremacy."⁷⁵ Second is the emphasis on morality and the increased presence of monitoring. Some officials have postponed decisions in the hopes that this unwanted attention is simply a phase that they can wait out, but the institutionalization of this monitoring makes waiting unlikely to be successful.

Analysis of Anti-Corruption Activities and Alternative Arguments

The argument proposed here provides context for understanding the variety of changes in internal power dynamics and state rhetoric in China over the past few years, separating the Reform Era into a previous technocratic mode and the current neopolitical mode. Other interpretations and alternatives have been offered. I briefly discuss some of these as well as evidence that could aid in distinguishing opposing observable implications.

The first alternative account to my argument is simply that there has not been a political transition and that purges have become part of the regular politics of new leaders being installed in China's increasingly institutionalized Reform Era. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao both initiated similar attacks on corruption and calls for probity (A. Wedeman, 2005, 2012). However, Xi's various campaigns have led to more investigations and the removal of more, higher level officials than previous iterations. Politburo and former Politburo Standing Committee members (Bo Xilai and Zhou

⁷⁴ (Wildau, 2014)

⁷⁵ (Xinhua, 2014c). That being said, the regime has referred to moving away from GDP on a number of previous occasions. In 2015, Shanghai became the first provincial unit to not release a GDP growth target in decades ("GDP apostasy," 2015, "Shanghai's shunning of GDP obsession seen as welcome move towards quality growth," n.d.).

Yongkang) officials have been pushed out of the party, as has a leading military figure (Xu Caihou).⁷⁶

A related account acknowledges changes but argues that the Reform Era is best understood as a series of centralizing and decentralizing cycles with the current moment an example of the former. For example, in *Factions and Finance*, Shih argues that decentralization and centralization of banking and financial operations moved in cycles.⁷⁷ A generalist faction, led by Deng, Hu, and Zhao, pushed to devolve investment decisions to localities where their allies/experience laid, while what he terms a technocratic faction, led by Chen Yun, attempted to walk back these changes and have central authorities control the financial levers. Turning to the recent period, however, the centralizing changes under Xi are principally political rather than economic and appear less likely to be reversed. That is, while these changes undoubtedly have economic consequences and perhaps even economic causes, the mechanisms of centralization are primarily political and institutional. The CCDI's expansion and its ascent up the local party hierarchy increase the power of the center's monitors in the localities. The Reform Era has seen episodes of significant economic centralization, such as the 1994 Fiscal Reforms, but political centralization has been significantly rarer. The long duration of the anti-corruption crusade also distinguishes this effort from those in prior cycles.

A third alternative presents Xi Jinping's political activities as separate from any potential economic transformations that he is pursuing. This view may accept that the purges have been more significant but do not see an economic transformation taking place or separate the anti-corruption campaign from economic changes. Instead, these views see the new leader as removing intransigents, enemies, or the particularly corrupt. Proponents of this view tend to be those that regard Xi as having a personal preference for individual austerity and against corruption. However, such a personality based vision ignores other pieces of the building up of the new normal. As noted above, the centralization efforts of the regime are not limited to the anti-corruption and mass line campaign but also include policy areas as distinct as urbanization policy. That the megacity plans are widely seen as centralizing efforts attacking lower level power reinforces the conception that centralization is a core piece of the transition taking place.

An examination of where the investigations have taken place may help clarify their intent. The personal preference alternative and my account differ in their expectations about the locales in which investigations may first take place. While this alternative

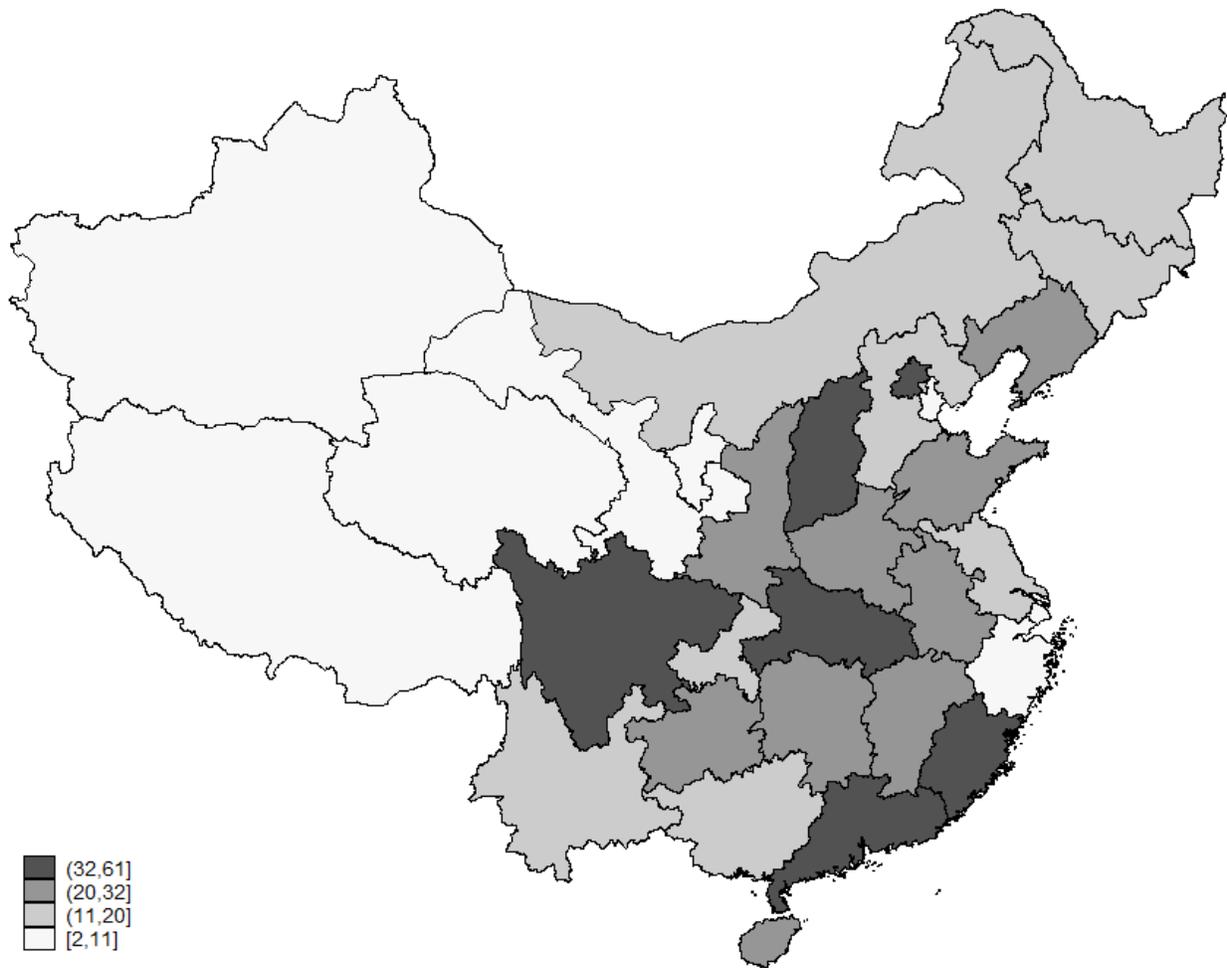
⁷⁶ (Barreda & Yan, 2014; Caixin, 2014; "Zhou Yongkang's Downfall," 2014)

⁷⁷ (V. C. Shih, 2009)

account would focus on the locales with the greatest corruption, my account of the risks emanating from local economic mismanagement would point to investigations being targeted in locales with more accumulated economic and political risks, with relevant measures including levels of overinvestment, profit margins, and vacancy rates.

The investigations under examination here come from 726 news releases publicized by the CCDI on its website in 2013 and 2014.⁷⁸ The investigations are geographically distributed as depicted in Figure 1.

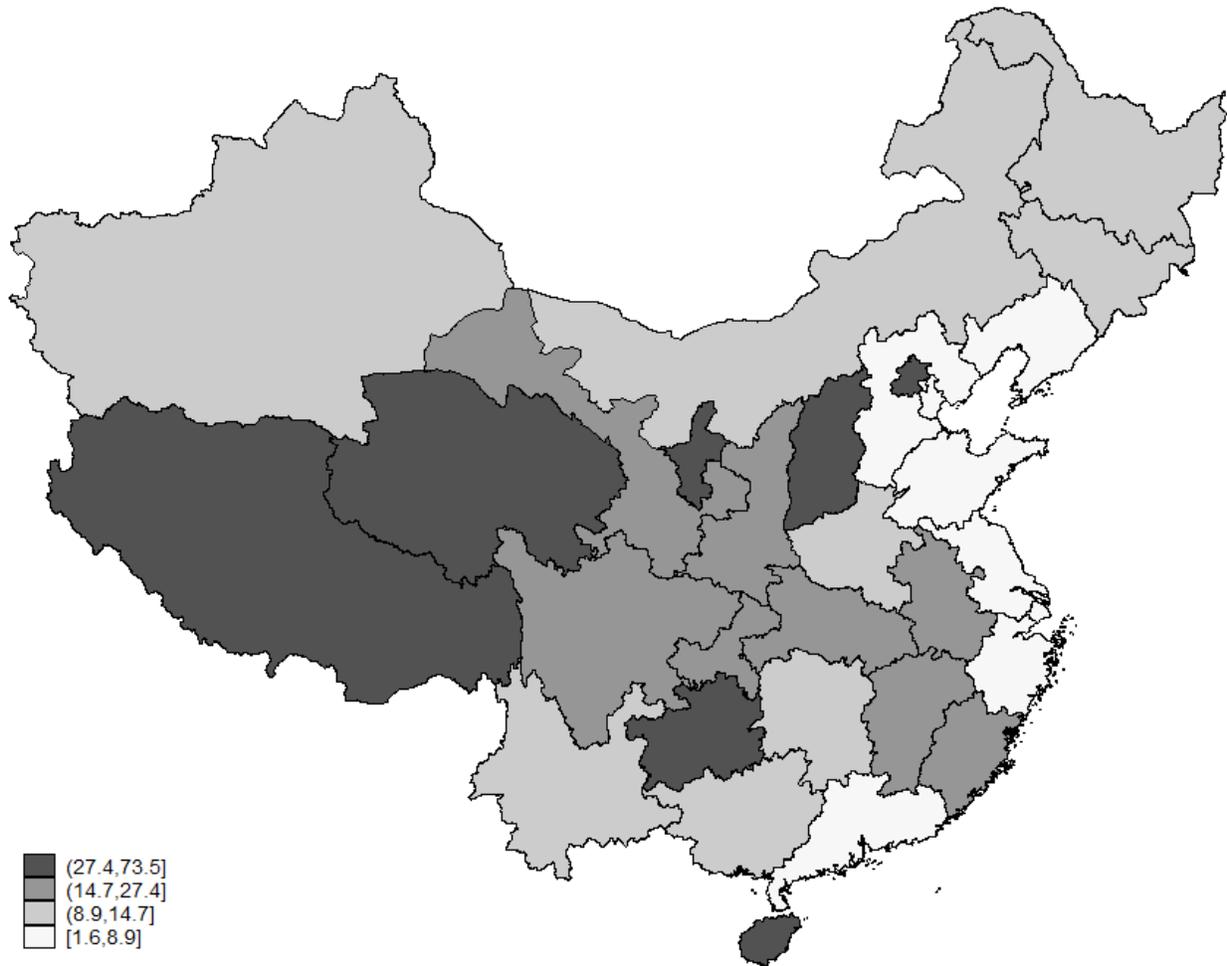
Figure 1. Spatial Distribution of Anti-Corruption Investigations, 2013-14



⁷⁸ The data were scraped from the CCDI website independently by the author and the *South China Morning Post* in 2014. On Jan. 1, 2015, the website changed breaking all prior hyperlinks. The SCMP updated its publicly available Google Fusion table with case data and working links.

However, the raw count of investigations ignores the variance in provincial size. In contrast to Figure 1, Figure 2 shows the number of investigations divided by provincial GDP to account for this variation.

Figure 2. Investigations per 1 Trillion Yuan GDP



As a measure of economic risks associated with the argument presented here, I use residential construction completed during the three years from 2010 to 2012 compared with a baseline of a decade prior (2000-2002).⁷⁹ The mean value of 4.1 translates to over four times as much residential construction taking place in the latter period than in the former. Political connections run in two directions. First, areas associated with President

⁷⁹ The data are “Floor Space of Residential Buildings Completed” from the National Bureau of Statistics and compiled by Wind Financial Information.

Xi Jinping should see fewer investigations than expected, all else equal.⁸⁰ Second, areas linked with political rivals or cliques should see more investigations than expected, all else equal. Following others, these locales are coded as significant corrupt cliques: Sichuan and Zhou Yongkang; Shanxi and Ling Jihua; Yunnan and Bai Enpei; Jiangxi and Su Rong; and Guangdong and Wan Qingliang.⁸¹ A basic count model of investigations across China's provinces finds a strong positive relationship with the cliques but little else.

Using the preferred measure of investigations per unit of GDP, the results in Table 1 point strongly in favor of economic risk affecting the pattern of investigations. Residential construction growth is positively associated with more investigations over GDP, while other factors fail to differentiate themselves from zero. The simple statistical model here is further suggestive of the importance of accumulated risk in the anti-corruption crusade.

Table 1. Investigations / GDP Are Strongly Connected to Economic Risk

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Residential Construction Growth	3.59*	3.61*	3.84*
	(1.78)	(1.81)	(1.96)
Corrupt Clique Locales, SCMP		2.01	2.68
		(3.83)	(4.15)
Xi Jinping Connected Provinces			4.84
			(6.62)
Constant	3.56	3.13	1.60
	(6.67)	(6.89)	(8.19)
Observations	30	30	30
R-squared	0.28	0.29	0.30

Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

⁸⁰ Xi's provincial work history is predominantly in Fujian and Zhejiang, additionally Shaanxi is his birthplace as well as the locale where he was sent to do manual labor during the Cultural Revolution.

⁸¹ Of course, the SCMP is looking at the investigations and their location in the creation of their lists.

Conclusion

The principal claim of the paper is that China's Reform Era is undergoing an important political transformation in its political mode. Further, I argue that this political transformation is both an attempt to fix the economic and political pathologies of the prior technocratic era as well as a new justification strategy for the regime, serving as a hedge against the end of China's rapid economic development. The changes centralize political authority, increase standards of behavior on local officials, extend the institutional capacities of extant inspection units, and promulgate new norms of behavior. This set of arguments can help clarify and place in context the political and economic news coming out of China in the past few years. Alternatives to pieces of the argument exist but tend to reflect individual news items rather than a complete alternative scenario.

At its most expansive, the political elements of the new normal could be seen as a move away from quantification and sciencism towards a Confucian-based governance by process rather than rule. That is, in moving away from the limited vision into localities focusing on just a few quantified metrics, the Chinese regime is not simply changing the metrics that it uses or even just adding a few additional metrics to the list on a cadre's annual evaluation form, rather it could be interpreted as a shift away from metric and rule based governance altogether. If not rules, then what? Process-based governance, where the proper authorities will judge whether lower level officials acted in a proper manner given the local circumstances. While such evaluations are likely to suffer in transparency terms (and thus be able to hide transgressions of favored agents or attack enemies even if they have not transgressed), in accountability terms this process-based evaluation might be able to incorporate a wider breadth of participation and feedback from the citizenry below as well as give latitude to higher levels to impose their wishes on lower levels.

In the end, investigation of a major political and economic transformation inside a dictatorial regime shows the significance of mass politics in nondemocratic politics. While dictators tend to be ultimately removed by other elites, mass politics remains critical to the balance of threats that they face.

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