

Corruption

Tānwū fǔbài 贪污腐败

Corruption has always plagued China, even as it has been frowned on by most of society. Factors embedded in the modern, Communist, system—such as centralization of the economy, state control of resources, lack of a clear division between public and private sectors, and a single political party—seem to promote corruption.

T*anwu*, the Chinese word for *corruption*, comprises characters literally meaning “dirt” and “greed.” When combined with the word *fuhua* or *fubai*, the meaning is “a corrupt individual, society, or government.” The Chinese people generally regard corruption as a serious social and political problem. Leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have realized that the practice has gravely threatened its legitimacy and have repeatedly launched anticorruption campaigns.

Corruption in China has a long history. The writer-philosophers of the early classical documents regarded corruption as a moral depravity, a violation of the prevailing moral code. Even the emperor was accountable. An emperor who was corrupt had betrayed his Mandate of Heaven, which gave him his right to rule. As early as the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), punishment was meted out for public corruption. The Qin criminal code contained a list of severe penalties for offenses related to “dereliction of duty in office.”

Public corruption contributed to the Taiping rebellion (*taiping tienguo*, “the Heavenly Kingdom of Great

Peace”) of 1851 to 1864, the largest uprising in modern Chinese history. Government mismanagement of public works and a weakening economy, along with military defeats at the hands of Western forces, sparked the rebellion. Leaders of this pivotal event in Chinese history introduced many of the ideas and reforms that helped shape modern China.

In the People’s Republic, the definition of corruption has changed according to the political aims of the period. In more politically radical times, deviation from the prevailing ideology, which was considered antisocialist or bureaucratic behavior, was a sign of corruption. During these times reports of corrupt behavior were seldom made public. Only at the end of the 1970s, as reform policies began to emerge, was the press permitted to report cases of corruption again.

Some cases of corruption became public spectacle. This was the time of the trials of the infamous “Gang of Four,” four officials of the CCP accused of attempting to seize power after Mao’s death. The gang—led by Jiang Qing, Mao’s last wife—and their associates were branded as counterrevolutionary forces and officially held accountable for most of the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.

Despite periodic crackdowns on public corruption, the problem continues. Factors embedded in the system—such as centralization of the economy, state control of resources, lack of a clear division between public and private sectors, and a single political party—seem to promote corruption. Psychological factors, too—such as defects in the revolutionary model, changes in values, shortages of goods and resources, and the division between town and country—contribute to corruption.

The Internet and Corruption

Lively use of the Internet in China has sparked controversies about both corrupt government officials and the potential for online mob justice without due legal process.

Lawmakers in Xuzhou have passed a law which makes it illegal to post “private information” about individuals online.

It is being seen as evidence of the concern officials have about blogs and internet forums that criticize the authorities and state institutions.

Internet users have attacked the new law; a poll found 90% oppose it.

City authorities say they will fine people more than \$700 (£500), and ban them from using the internet for six months if they post “private information” online.

HUMAN FLESH SEARCH

In China, when an individual is suspected of doing something wrong, people post information about them online and ask others to find out more.

This is known here as a “human flesh search”, and is a form of vigilante justice.

Those whose details are made public in this way often get bombarded with abusive messages or harassed.

It sounds cruel; after all, these are not people who have been convicted of any crime.

But many Chinese believe they are an effective way to keep corrupt officials in check in a country where it is hard to find other means hold them to account legally.

Last month an official in Jiangsu province was sacked after pictures of him with what appeared to be a valuable watch and an expensive pack of cigarettes, both judged to be too pricey for a civil servant, were uploaded onto the internet.

The posting prompted a vigorous campaign against him online which led to his dismissal.

Source: Hogg, C. (2009, January 5). China city to ban web ‘manhunts.’ BBC News. Retrieved March 11, 2009, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7811550.stm>

To make matters worse, recent reforms such as decentralization, opening to the outside world, a growing market economy, migration, and changes in property structures have led to increases in corruption in some areas. Without reforms that lead to a redistribution of power, officials within and outside of the party continue to control resources and freely line their own pockets.

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Further Reading

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- Manion, M. (2004). *Corruption by design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sapio, F. (2005). *Implementing anticorruption in the PRC*. Lund, Sweden: Centre for East and Southeast Asian studies, Lund University.
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