

# **Constructing Corruption as a Policy Problem in China's Emerging Print Media Landscape**

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## **Abstract**

*Corruption as a phenomenon has a paradoxical quality: it is both pervasive and elusive, both systemic in its causes and particularistic in its expressions and scandals. This makes it highly susceptible to 'framing' effects in the public imagination, which in turn can have important political consequences. This paper develops a framework for characterizing corruption frames – broadly speaking, the manner and set of associations with which corruption and anti-corruption efforts are depicted, in this case in the print media. To test this framework, it applies content analysis to a sample of articles from six newspapers in mainland China. In addition to broadly characterizing the relative frequency of different corruption frames – which have different implications in terms of being 'system-challenging' or 'system-supporting' – we use variation in this print media sample to examine hypotheses related to the effects of Chinese media ownership and of Chinese President Xi Jinping's efforts to use anti-corruption as a political brand. The findings suggest a dilemma of media control in authoritarian settings: the more anti-corruption efforts are highlighted in an attempt to build a political brand, the more systemic the portrayal of corruption must be, which risks further fueling public cynicism and anger.*

## **Keywords**

corruption, journalism, newspapers, media framing, media effects, China

## **Introduction**

This paper develops a framework for characterizing corruption frames – broadly speaking, the manner and set of associations with which corruption and anti-corruption efforts are depicted in the print media. To test this frame in practice, it applies content analysis to a sample of articles from six newspapers in mainland China. In addition to broadly characterizing the relative frequency of different corruption frames – which have different implications in terms of being ‘system-challenging’ or ‘system-supporting’ - we use variation in this print media sample to examine specific hypotheses related to the effect of media ownership and the effect of timing within a political cycle (specifically, before and after Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ascension to power).

In the next section, we provide context regarding the corruption-public opinion nexus in China and beyond. After section three presents the analytical framework and specific research questions, section four explores the literature on framing. The data and results sections follow in section five, and the paper concludes by drawing out implications both for the literature and for understanding state-society relations in China.

## **Background and Literature Review**

The issue of corruption looms large on the variegated landscape of the contemporary Chinese media. The political salience of public opinion in this area - and its importance to

the sustainability of the Chinese system - can hardly be overstated. As in many other countries, the corruption problem in China has proven to be a powerful focal point for public discontent and, in some notable incidents, agitation and unrest at the local level (Knight, 2012).

While corruption thus affects public opinion, it is equally true that public opinion shapes governmental anti-corruption agendas. Governments and individual politicians have strong political incentives to appear to be *clean* and well as *aggressive* in combatting corruption. These incentives are stronger the more widespread corruption is perceived to be in a society. Anti-corruption policymaking and enforcement efforts are central to certain political branding efforts, including that surrounding President Xi Jinping's administration in China, which has made fighting corruption on both a grand and petty scale – “tigers and flies” as the new slogan has it – one of its highest priorities, at least as communicated in press releases (The Guardian, 2013).

From a longer-term perspective, political scientists have long noted that government institutions need to be perceived as acceptably clean and performing acceptably well by a large enough segment of the population over time in order to maintain a semblance of legitimacy. That legitimacy is in turn central to the maintenance of political stability over time, even (perhaps, especially) in authoritarian political settings such as China (Guo, 2010).

These reasons – as well as the practical costs of corruption to social and economic development – provide strong motivation to develop anti-corruption laws at the country level, and for countries to commit to signing international protocols affirming their cooperation in fighting transnational corruption. And this is exactly what the world has

witnessed, especially over the past 20 years. It is not an exaggeration to claim we are living in an ‘age of corruption control’.

Despite its high profile and importance, corruption as a phenomenon has a paradoxical quality, in several ways. First, particularly in societies beset by systemic corruption, it is pervasive, affecting people’s daily lives to a significant degree. But it is also an activity in which people obviously have a high degree of motivation to hide their behavior, and thus it is rather elusive and difficult to measure. The second paradox is that it is systemic in its causes, but particularistic in its expressions and scandals, classically the stuff of twists and turns worthy of a classical Chinese novel. Third, in many polities around the world corruption is a frequent topic for high-level leaders; and yet in as many settings, it is exactly those leaders who are most suspect of being what in the Republic of Georgia used to be referred to as “thieves-in-law” (World Bank, 2012). For that same reason, pronouncements or even enforcement action against corruption in settings marked by high levels of corruption will have a strong tendency to be viewed cynically by the public, blunting the effect of media coverage. The paradoxical quality surrounding corruption makes it highly susceptible to 'framing' effects in the public imagination, and raises the potential importance of media frames in mediating the political and social effects arising from corruption perceptions.

### ***Framing in social science research***

The literature on ‘framing’ in the social sciences is deep, generating hundreds of contributions across several fields and sub-fields (de Vreese, 2012). The basic notion grows out of Irving Goffman’s famous work *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974), and refers to the process by which some salient factors of a situation are highlighted while others are

restricted or excluded; and that these factors or attributes of a story deeply influence the subjective interpretations and meanings attached by writer – and by implication reader – to the narrative content in question. Media framing, in turns, refers to the way in which “how the way media package the story influences the knowledge available to the public” (Haigh, 2010:47). Work on media framing draws on a long tradition of the concept of “frame building” – “exploring the factors that may influence the media’s selective uses of certain frames” (Kim, Carvalho & Davis 2010, p. 563). Framing has been used to explore a wide variety of phenomena (Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Semetko, 2011; Boydston & Glazier, 2013; David et al., 2014; Djerf-Pierre, Ekstrom & Johansson, 2006).

Despite the widespread use of the concept of framing, the literature has also noted several limitations in its current conceptual development. Over a decade ago, Scheufele noted that “no evidence has yet been systematically collected about how various factors impact the structural qualities in news in terms of framing” (1999, p. 109); in other words, work to date has not been greatly successful in exploring the determinants of media frames in news stories. There is little reason to believe that this has changed in the last 15 years, according to some meta-reviews of the framing literature (Jorg, 2009; Van, 2007). Second and relatedly, the issue of power has been downplayed as a cause and consequence of frames. As Carragee and Roefs (2004, p. 214) have suggested, “framing research needs to be linked to the political and social questions regarding power,” rather than dealing with narratives from a purely discourse or abstract perspective.

This paper attempts to be responsive to both of the aforementioned weaknesses in the framing literature to date, namely poorly developed examination of the determinants of corruption frames and a neglect of power variables.

### ***Corruption, media ownership and political branding in China***

Numerous analyses have demonstrated how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is highly sensitive to perceptions and public discourse surrounding its performance and legitimacy, including the integrity of its core leadership and institutions (Zhao, 2008; Stockmann, 2013). Political scientists and communications scholars have demonstrated ways in which the CCP actively attempts to control or influence the media environment to aid in the shaping of public opinion on such matters. Indeed, control over the dissemination of information through a range of coercive and productive instruments can be seen as a core instrument of state power on the Chinese political landscape, from the early days of the People's Republic through to today. In addition, CPC influence over the media has always been deployed by those at the apex of the political system to shape 'political brands' associated with key leaders. The cult of personality surrounding Mao Zedong is the obvious example; but other leaders, up to and including current the current CPC Chairman and President, Xi Jinping, have attempted to shape narratives that to a greater or lesser degree focus on their personal characteristics, values and commitments (MacFarquhar, 2016; Manion, 2016).

Attempts to control information and guide public opinion and to shape political brands may be a constant on the Chinese media scene, but the media sector itself has grown far more complex over the past three decades of reform. Three fundamental changes have a direct bearing on the current topic. First, the information available to the public from non-state sources has exploded (Yang, 2009a, b). This is linked to a variety of developments, among them the explosion of internet use, urbanization, the numbers of travellers overseas, and social media.

The second trend is the commercialization and diversification of media outlets (Zhao, 2008). Both print and visual media have experienced huge increases in circulation, viewership and the number of outlets. Parallel with increasing numbers, the political economy of media ownership has become more complex, as official, semi-official and commercial outlets vie for readership/viewership against a backdrop of commercial pressures and opportunities.

If media ownership and incentive structure have become more varied, so too have the instruments of control deployed by the CPC to ‘guide’ public opinion (Zhao, 2008). Direct censorship still plays an obvious role in at least two ways: the so-called “great firewall” preventing sensitive topics from reaching Chinese publics via the internet; and direct censorship, pre- or post-publication, of stories that are deemed unacceptable. Control is also achieved through a coordinated apparatus of instructions and guidelines provided to media outlets of different types on the way in which certain stories or themes should be handled, down to particular formulaic language that must be adopted for certain stories. And self-censorship – whereby media outlets and individuals ‘voluntarily’ refrain from covering or discussion certain subjects out of a general aversion to the complications they could incur in the process – is certainly common, if difficult to quantify.

On the other hand, a number of analysts have explored the way in which the controlling apparatus of the state with respect to information and media outlets creates more room for maneuver on many topics than is commonly thought (Tang & Huhe, 2014). The growth of Virtual Private Networks to leapfrog the ‘great firewall’ is one obvious example. Media commercialization has created an opportunity for some papers – even semi-official ones – to attempt to push boundaries and take risks to gain readership. And some argue that

China's leaders are increasingly attempting to use a diverse range of media outlets not just to *shape* public opinion in an increasingly complex society but also to better *understand* and *respond* to it as well.

For all of these reasons, media framing of corruption is an important potential application of framing theory, one which to date has seen very little scholarship (Zhao, 2010). The next section turns to specific questions about such framing in the Chinese context, and to a general framework for describing these frames.

### **Key Research Questions and Framework**

How then can we understand the way in which corruption issues are framed in the media? There are several potential building blocks for understanding corruption frames in any country of significant size, with the following focusing on China.

#### ***Actors, extent and justice***

One concerns actors. *Who* is portrayed to be potentially or actually corrupt? For the Chinese scene in particular, corrupt actors could theoretically be found at the central, intermediate or local levels of government; in service delivery entities or local institutions (such as local courts); or in the domestic private, foreign-invested or state-owned sectors of the economy. Distinguishing among these groups, we are particularly interested in the distinction between “core” actors – meaning the leaders of central and provincial level institutions (including State-Owned Enterprises of national significance); and more or less “peripheral” actors, such as bureaucrats well beneath any leadership level, district and village level officials, and officials of local service delivery institutions and lesser economic entities.



A second dimension of frame concerns the degree to which corruption is presented as widespread. One can imagine that as cases of corruption are covered in the media, they could be presented as either an *isolated or individual action* (e.g. a single ‘bad apple’) or as part of a *network* of bad actors, a *broader or widespread trend* that implies that the corruption observed has strong *systemic* features.

A third dimension is the extent to which justice is perceived to be meted out to the corrupt; or to put it differently, the extent to which people *running* the system are perceived to be able to *fix* the system, as far as corrupt behavior is concerned. Are the cases being reported already being prosecuted, or is there a sense that guilty parties are going undetected and unpunished? Is the enforcement effort characterized as strong or, in contrast, as hapless and overwhelmed by the scale of the problem?

Putting these three dimensions together, one can generate a set of logical combinations leading to specific types of corruption frames for the Chinese context, and by extension, possibly for others as well. The motivation, as noted earlier, is the assumption that different frames can have different effects on public opinion. Some frames on the dimensions just mentioned will be more likely to provoke public anger towards the government as whole, or alternatively to buttress public perceptions of the integrity and effectiveness of core government processes and anti-corruption institutions. Specifically, we posit that frames tending to have the effect of undermining public confidence in ‘the system’ – “*system-challenging frames*” in other words – would involve:

- a) corruption arising from high-level leaders at the core of the system; and/or
- b) corruption presented as a collective or widespread phenomenon; and/or

c) corruption cases presented as going unpunished, with anti-corruption enforcement portrayed as weak or overwhelmed relative to the problem at hand.

Conversely, a relatively benign or even “*system-supporting*” portrayal of corruption would involve primarily local actors in isolated events being caught and disciplined by authorities who are clearly in control of the situation.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 depicts a typology that combines these three characteristics. Quadrant A is the most benign case, one in which corruption is observed in peripheral, individual or isolated actors, with no sense that the broader currents of the system are affected, whether at local or central levels of government. In quadrant B, numerous corrupt actors exist at the local level or in peripheral institutions. This clearly could represent a sense of harassment and/or serious harm to the populace, but the implication is that the problem primarily lies at the local level, whereas the central level, or core institutions of power, can be trusted. It is a question, therefore of a “good principals” at the core, who may or may not be able to contain corruption by localized “bad agents”. Quadrant C reflects the possibility of corruption at fairly high or core levels taking place, but by individual wrongdoers, not by a collective or network of actors. This quadrant is labeled ‘political intrigue’ because it may be interpreted as a case of high-profile personalities being unmasked as corrupt, but not necessarily in a way that destabilizes the system. Where ‘high level/core’ corruption combines with a ‘collective/widespread’ portrayal, we have a “rotten core” frame, in which there is serious systemic trouble: quadrant D.

A third dimension – that involving commitment to, and the visible enforcement of, the law – cuts across all four quadrants. Therefore, we can observe two variants for each

quadrant, in which justice (i.e. effective enforcement action) is seen as either being “visibly served” (e.g. A1) or “in question” if not outright denied (e.g. A2).

Putting all this together, we can observe that any movements in a north-westerly direction – up and to the left – represent potentially more damaging or ‘system-challenging’ frames. On the other hand, movements downwards and to the right help ‘sanitize’ corruption coverage, pushing it to relatively more benign or ‘system-supporting’ interpretations.

### ***Valence and analytical depth in corruption framing***

A fourth dimension concerns details embedded within anti-corruption reporting that could trigger different affective orientations or “valences”, in the reader. Independent of the *level* on which corruption occurs, degree to which corruption is shown as *widespread*, or the level of *punishment* meted out to the corrupt, the following elements might be assumed to raise the negative emotional valence of a corruption frame:

- a) Descriptions of cases that describe, sometimes graphically, large consequences of corrupt acts on specific victims (e.g. children dying in an earthquake because money to construct schools to a higher safety standard was pilfered);
- b) Descriptions of cases that highlight lifestyle excesses of the corrupt (such as their illicit personal relationships; the favoring of one’s children for jobs; lifestyles of luxury, etc.
- c) Presence of ‘political intrigue’ in cases, in which corrupt officials are shown to be colluding with others to reap illicit rewards.

In addition to valence effects, newspaper descriptions of corruption vary in terms of how *analytically* and *in depth* they dissect potential *causes* of corruption.

### ***Hypotheses***

With this basic frame characterization in place, the paper explores the following more specific hypotheses focusing on the distribution of the composite ‘frames’ shown in Figure 1.

*Distribution of corruption frames: General.* The first hypothesis is the most general one about what one might expect from authoritarian political environments in terms of the attempt to control the framing of such a sensitive area as corruption. ***Hypothesis 1: Media frames found in China will tend towards the framing of corruption issues as local, individualized and with ‘justice served’, i.e. will adopt more ‘system supporting’ frames.***

*Distribution of corruption frames by media ownership.* The second hypothesis goes to variations in media ownership even within China, drawing on the analysis of media observers who suggest that there is greater room for maneuver (that is, to adopt system-challenging frames) than is commonly assumed on the Chinese media landscape.

***Hypothesis 2: The degree to which frame adoption is ‘system supporting’ will be correlated with the degree of direct state ownership and control over newspapers.*** Put differently, the space to adopt ‘system challenging’ frames in a given newspaper will be inversely correlated with the degree to which the paper is seen as “official” source of news.

*Distribution of corruption frames by timing in the political cycle.* The final hypothesis takes its cue from the fact that even within an authoritarian political system, the *explicit* or direct use of corruption frames as a tool for political branding may vary. In China, President Xi Jinping is widely noted to have emphasized corruption control – both of big actors at the central level (so-called ‘tigers’) and ‘flies’ at the local level – as a theme of his administration. The effect of this political branding should in theory be to focus *more* attention onto corruption generally, including some stories about corruption among core or

central players, and while walking this political tight-rope, to highlight ‘justice visibly served’ frames, i.e. more consistent and effective enforcement.

The third hypothesis thus looks at the presence of corruption frames in the two years *before* and three years *after* his assumption of paramount power in the Chinese system in November 2012 (endnote 1). ***Hypothesis 3: The following should tend to increase as part of ‘political branding’ attempts around corruption issues under President Xi Jinping:***

***3a: The aggregate amount of media coverage of corruption issues;***

***3b: Central but isolated cases of corruption (highlighting isolated ‘tigers’); and***

***3c: the ‘justice visibly served’ dimension of enforcement and anti-corruption policy commitment.***

A final hypothesis picks up on the valence and analytical framing effects:

***4a: Newspapers with greater incentive to sell to a mass audience will be more likely to highlight negative emotional valence or ‘intrigue’ frames when covering corruption stories.***

***4b: Newspapers that focus on more in-depth, analytical coverage of issues, or of a specialized nature, are more likely to include an examination of the causes of particular cases of corruption.***

## **Data and Methods**

### *Article selection and measurement scheme*

Table one summarizes the sampled publications and some of their key characteristics. Two newspapers each were selected to fall into three categories of media ownership – official, semi-official and commercial – identified by Daniela Stockmann (2013) on the

basis of in-depth interviews with local media observers in her *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*. For these newspapers, a key search on several variants of the word “corruption” was conducted using the Hong Kong-based full-text (equivalent to Lexis-Nexus in the US context). Using a randomizer algorithm, 10 articles from each newspaper (that met the basic characteristics of being more than one paragraph and centered on corruption in China) were selected for 2011 and 8 articles from each selected for each year from 2012-2015, resulting in a sample frame of 250 articles.

[Table 1 about here]

We developed the questionnaire shown in Annex 1 to capture different aspects of the articles, and applied it on a sample of 250 articles. Two coders – both Chinese native speakers with post-graduate training in content analysis – received training on the protocol and were tested for intercoder reliability on a randomly selected sample of 40 articles, yielding agreement on 87.5% of items (Krippendorff’s Alpha = .79). The raw data was read into a statistical package (STATA), which was then used to generate summary statistics (see Tables 2 and 3).

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

Several questions were combined to form frame elements:

- a) For the designation of an actor as “core”, central and provincial leaders, inclusive of state-owned enterprise leaders, were used, and all others designated as “peripheral”.
- b) For the designation of “widespread”, a single question from the questionnaire was used, namely whether the article discusses a corruption case in context of “many others that are like it”, as an “example of a wider trend”.

- c) The designation “justice visibly served” is an amalgamation with equal weights given to three elements on the questionnaire, asking whether punishment to corrupt parties has already been meted out (with half points if parties are under investigation); whether a number of corrupt parties are implied or stated to be still at large; and whether the article references CCP anti-corruption policies or commitments.
- d) The ‘negative valence’ designation is given to articles that depicted any of the following: specific victims of corruption suffering serious consequences; presence of political intrigue in the description; and/or description of personal ‘excesses’ of the corrupt.
- e) The ‘analytical coverage’ designation is based on the single question of whether there is specific discussion of the *causes* of corruption (not including personal morality as a cause, if mentioned).

For the statistical analysis, two tests are used in the hypothesis testing, supplemented by visual inspection of the data. The first, used for H2 on the effects of media ownership and for H3b and H3c on developments since Xi Jinping assumed office, is a multinomial logistic model, with mean marginal effects of the explanatory variables reported. Conceptually, the model is treating the choice of frame – from among the eight logical possibilities listed in Figure 1 – as independent choices facing newspaper editors as they cover a certain segment of corruption-related stories.

The second is a probit model, used for testing the determinants of the following categorical dependent variables for different frames: ‘justice visibly served’, emotional valence and analytical depth frame variables (H3c, H4a and H4b).

#### *Limitations*

Some limitations in the data should be kept in mind. First, it is not possible to be certain that articles in the database are exactly as they first appeared in print; post-publication censorship may have taken place in some cases. Second, the data analysis scheme has some subjectivity built into it, and to date tests for consistency across coders have not been carried out.

## **Results**

*Hypothesis 1: Media frames found in China will tend towards the framing of corruption issues as local, individualized and with ‘justice served’, i.e. will adopt more ‘system supporting’ frames.*

Component results are summarized in Table 4. The most simple way of considering this hypothesis as a whole, given the framework, is to say that our expectation is that most cases of corruption reported in the Chinese print media will focus frame A and specifically A2; that few will be found in D (the most system challenging of the frames); and that ‘justice visibly served’ frames will dominate ‘justice in question’ frames. Only the last of these statements is clearly true: 66% of articles contain a clear ‘justice visibly served’ dimension. In contrast, frames involving the depiction of widespread corruption, whether at the core or periphery of the system, outnumber isolated depictions of corruption by a factor of 2:1.

[Table 4 about here]

*Hypothesis 2: The degree to which frame adoption is ‘system supporting’ will be correlated with the degree of direct state ownership and control over newspapers.*



This hypothesis directly tests any differences in framing effects between the official, semi-official and commercial newspapers in China, and is motivated by a strong presumption in the literature that official news sources are more likely to rationalize the centrality and legitimacy of the party-state (Song & Chang, 2012). The multinomial logistic model results are presented in Table 5. Aside from the categorical variables for media ownership, a control variable for the pre- vs. post-Xi Jinping period is given (one that will receive more attention in H3 below).

Results confirm the most obvious test of the hypothesis, though the effect is not dramatic. Commercial papers are 16.7% more likely to adopt the most system-challenging frame – D2 “Core, Widespread, Justice in question” – as compared with official papers. Semi-official papers are also significantly more likely than official papers to adopt a frame D orientation, but only in its “justice visibly served” variation, which tones down the system-challenging aspect of the frame to a considerable degree.

[Table 5 about here]

It is interesting to note that official papers are *more* likely than both semi-official and commercial papers to cover cases of widespread but low-level corruption, with ‘justice visibly served’. This ‘good principal, bad agents’ frame – with the principal shown to be fully in control of the situation – is partially system-challenging, in that it demonstrates that corruption has systemic elements; but its apparent saving grace, from an official perspective, is that it locates the systemic corruption at the periphery while invoking the strong hand of the state in its effective control. We return to this theme below.

On a final note, the probit model shown in Table 7, which attempts to predict ‘justice visibly served’ orientation using the same media ownership and Xi Jinping period

predictors, demonstrates that commercial papers are strongly more likely to adopt system-challenging frame on this specific dimension as compared with official papers. Again this is confirming evidence for H2.

***Hypothesis 3: The following should tend to increase as part of ‘political branding’ attempts around corruption issues under President Xi Jinping:***

***3a: The aggregate amount of media coverage of corruption issues***

Table 6 shows the raw count of all articles containing keywords related to corruption in the six newspapers of the sample. Coverage is substantially up – as much as 90% in the case of the Global Times – over all papers over this period. For the sample, this hypothesis is strongly confirmed, which is hardly surprising given what we know of the “tigers and flies” anti-corruption campaign coverage associated with Xi Jinping’s political brand.

[Table 6 about here]

***3b: Central but isolated cases of corruption (highlighting isolated ‘tigers’)***

This hypothesis focuses attention onto what is arguably most unusual about Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign – its emphasis on “tigers” at high levels of the system; in our framework, this would be frame B, presumably in its ‘justice served’ variant (B2). Table 5 suggests this hypothesis is not confirmed; the coefficient for a ‘post-Xi Jinping’ effect with respect to the selection of B1 and B2 is not statistically different from zero.

[Table 7 about here]

***3c: the ‘justice visibly served’ dimension of enforcement and anti-corruption policy commitment.***

If Xi Jinping is indeed developing a ‘political brand’ around anti-corruption issues, this should manifest strongly in an increase in the ‘justice visibly served’ aspect of the article

framing. To test this, the first probit model shown in Table 7 takes the “justice visibly served” categorical variable as its dependent variable, and regresses it against the Xi Jinping period categorical variable, with the media ownership categorical variables as controls. The positive and significant coefficient on the Xi Jinping variable confirms the hypothesis that articles written since Xi Jinping period are significantly more likely to include a ‘justice visibly served’ orientation.

***Hypothesis 4:***

***4a: Newspapers with greater incentive to sell to a mass audience will be more likely to highlight negative emotional valence or ‘intrigue’ frames when covering corruption stories.***

This hypothesis attempts to tease out the effects of newspaper characteristics on ‘negative/intrigue-laden emotional valence’ framing of anti-corruption stories: essentially, writing articles inclusive of details that would fascinate, horrify or entertain – rather than merely ‘inform’ – a broad spectrum of readership. It is hypothesized specifically that the highest circulating general dailies in the sample *outside* the official category (which is subject to a far lesser extent to competitive and commercial pressures – see Zhao, 2008 and Stockmann 2013) will be more likely than either the smaller-circulation and more specialized economic papers in the sample, and the official papers, to highlight these elements.

The second part of Table 7 presents the probit results, which confirm, at a 10% confidence level, a relatively large positive impact of the semi-official papers on such valence frames, relative to the official category.

*4b: Newspapers that focus on more in-depth, analytical coverage of issues, or of a specialized nature, are more likely to include an examination of the causes of particular cases of corruption.*

This final hypothesis looks at the question of which newspapers in the sample are more likely to include in-depth analysis of the *causes* of corruption – something that might be termed an “analytical frame” here. The hypothesis suggests an unlikely coupling: that of the specialized anti-corruption agency report – the China Inspection newspaper within the official category – and the two economic newspapers that are well known for a more technical and substantive reporting style.

Table 8 suggests that these newspapers are indeed significantly more likely to use ‘analytical frames’ in their reporting on corruption than the others in the sample. The probit model also suggests that despite coverage of corruption stories increasing substantially under Xi Jinping, the quality of coverage – at least as assessed by this ‘analytical framing’ variable – has significantly declined under his administration.

[Table 8 about here]

## **Discussion**

This article makes a contribution on two levels.

First, it has proposed a way of characterizing the framing of corruption-related stories as they play out in the print media; this has never been done before, with the closest parallel being an analysis of valence surrounding stories of scandal and its use in electoral competition (Curini & Martelli, 2013). The framework is general enough that it may be used in a number of contexts; articles describing corruption, wherever in the world they appear, will describe corrupt actors with different positions within the system; make

inferences regarding the extent of corruption; shape perceptions of justice being ‘visibly served’ or in question; and include details that determine the valence or analytical depth of the narrative. The framework invites and facilitates inquiry regarding the *drivers* of variations in framing across newspapers and across media systems. And it opens the question as to the *impacts* of variations on public opinion and on the political and social consequences of corruption perceptions.

Second, the application of this framework to China sheds light on the effects of that country’s media politics. Analysts have for some time investigated the likely effects of widespread media commercialization trends on media coverage, particularly of politically or socially sensitive topics. More recently, President Xi Jinping’s aggressive anti-corruption campaign and its widespread coverage in the media have given rise to analyses linking anti-corruption campaigns, the consolidation of political power in a leadership transition, and longer-term political branding efforts (Manion, 2016). The current paper sheds light on both topics. The findings have suggested that commercial media do adopt more system-challenging frames than more official media outlets, and in many cases cover them with greater depth and emotional valence. Moreover, they show that coverage of Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign has emphasized the strong hand of the state in punishing corruption predominantly at *peripheral* levels of the system, despite occasional attention given to isolated “Tigers” caught at the central level.

The findings also suggest that corruption in Xi Jinping’s China is more likely to be portrayed as widespread – even systemic – than it is as an isolated case of a ‘few low-level bad apples’. This raises the ‘reformist authoritarian’s dilemma’ over media policy with respect to corruption stories. Authoritarian leaders eager to be seen as fixers of a system

beset by significant corruption will deploy whatever direct and indirect means are available to influence media coverage in a direction highlighting enforcement efforts and policy commitments. Yet the portrayal of corruption as relatively widespread – even systemic - is a precondition for such coverage; as such, it is an ironic precondition for successful political branding as an intrepid anti-corruption reformer. Therein lies the dilemma: the predominance of media framing of corruption as widespread may increase public anger, whereas assurances that ‘justice is being done’ may receive a cynical reception by a public wary of official accounts and of the shallow political brands built around aging and usually colorless apparatchiks. This is clearly a high-stakes game with an unpredictable end-point. Once this corruption/anti-corruption discourse takes root in an authoritarian polity, the safest prediction is of the continued and rising political salience of corruption issues in the country.

We see further developments in this line of research to take place in four directions. First, the measurement scheme can be refined. It is possible to further refine categories of corrupt actors relevant to different political systems. There are also almost certainly further measurable dimensions to corruption frames than those that have been presented in the current research. The ‘valence’ and ‘analytical depth’ measures can similarly be further developed and placed in comparative perspective. Second, we can attempt to apply the corruption frames concept to other countries, in order to develop a more comparative perspective and to further validate the concept. What in the corruption frames is China-specific and what is more general will be fascinating to explore. Third the discussion so far has not addressed evidence about the actual effect of the frames on public opinion (such as on political cynicism – see Jackson 2010, and Trussler and Soroka 2014) and/or social

mobilization around political issues. Examining such media effects in practice will be crucial to assessing the practical importance of this concept in the real world.

Finally, further research may examine the relative balance of journalistic agency and organizational practices (Bartholomé et al., 2015; Van Dalen, 2012) in mediating the effects of media ownership on frame selection for corruption articles. More finely grained institutional and ethnographic analysis will allow for a fuller description over time of China's emerging journalism culture in this sphere and beyond.

### **Endnotes:**

1. Specifically, after Xi Jinping ascended to the posts of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission. Although he did not become President until March 2013, the General Secretary post is widely viewed as the wellspring of power in the system.

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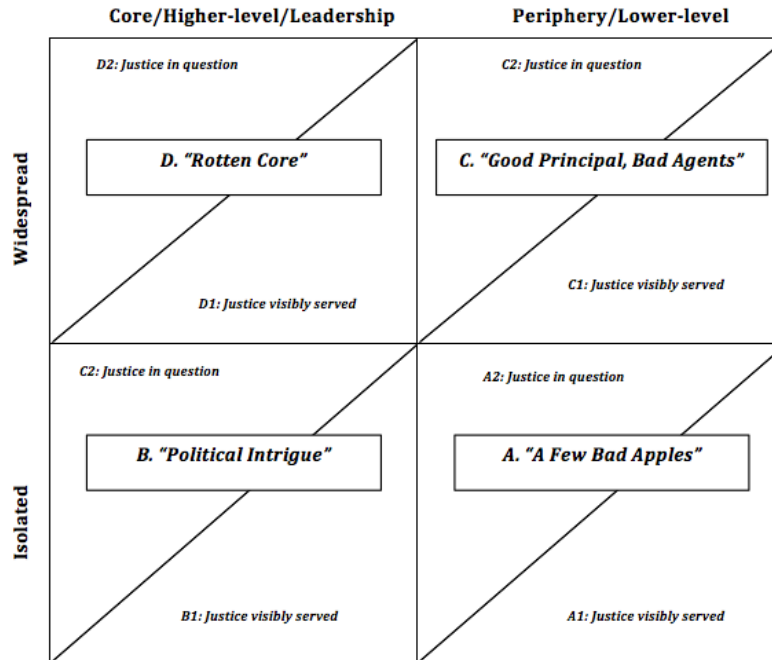
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Figure 1: Typology of media use of corruption frames in Chinese context\*



\* Summary key for Figure 1 (source: authors)

- A: Isolated incidents of corruption by low-level actors – **particularly system-supporting frame**
- B: Corruption at high levels, but by individual wrong-doers (implication: basic institutions working, stay vigilant)
- C: Widespread corruption by peripheral actors (implication: center is clean and presumably can fix system)
- D: Widespread corruption by leaders at the core of the system (implication: system legitimacy in doubt) – **particularly system-challenging fram**

Table 1. Basic information on sampled newspapers

Newspaper	Focus	Circulation	Ownership	Ownership classification
People's Daily (人民日报)	General daily, seen as mouthpiece of government	App. 3,000,000, distributed through bureaucratic channels	Central Committee / Communist Party of China	Official
China Discipline & Inspection News (中国纪检监察报)	Reports specializing in corruption and related cases	Daily; 940,000, distributed through bureaucratic channels	Central Commission of Discipline and Inspection; Ministry of Supervision	Official
Global Times (环球时报)	General interest	Six days a week; 2,000,000	Subsidiary of People's Daily	Semi-Official
Beijing Evening News (北京晚报)	General interest	Six days a week; 1,200,000	Beijing Daily publishing house	Semi-Official
21st Century Business Herald (21世纪经济报道)	Economic reporting; some general interest	Six days a week; 750,000	Shandong Sanlian Group publishing house	Commercial
The Economic Observer (经济观察报)	Economic reporting; some general interest	Weekly; 379,000	Southern Press Group publishing house	Commercial

Source: Stockman, 2013:71; publisher website

Table 2: Summary statistics: Corrupt actors identified in 250 articles

<i>Position:</i>	<b>N</b>	<b>Level of government – frequency distribution</b>				
		<b>Central</b>	<b>Provincial</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Village</b>	<b>Not given</b>
High-level / Leadership	142 (48%)	23%	57%	15%	5%	0%
Lower-level officials	63 (21%)	5%	59%	19%	16%	1%
Party member (non-leadership)	9 (3%)	11%	44%	22%	11%	11%
<b>Sector:</b>						
Courts	0 (0%)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Schools/Hospitals	13 (4%)	8%	77%	8%	8%	15%
Police	3 (1%)	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Army	3 (1%)	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
State-owned enterprises	34 (11%)	41%	53%	6%	0%	0%
Chinese private sector	9 (3%)	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Foreign private sector	12 (4%)	17%	0%	0%	0%	83%
Football association	10 (3%)	40%	50%	0%	0%	10%
Total*:	298 (100%)					

\* Total adds to more than 250 due to multiple corrupt actors identified in same article.

Table 3: Summary statistics for other frame components (N=250)

<b><i>Justice visibly served components:</i></b>	
<b>Corrupt actors are portrayed as:</b>	
- Still at large	12%
- Under investigation	29%
- Already punished	58%
<b>Article mentions existence of anti-corruption policy or commitment:</b>	
- specifically of Central Party	33%
- Of local government or individual organizations	19%
<b>Characterization of strength of enforcement action:</b>	
- Article shows all corrupt parties mentioned to be apprehended; government fully in control	61%
- Article shows some corrupt parties investigated or caught, with more on the way; government response getting stronger	30%
- Article discusses significant problems, with no definite sign of improvement on the horizon	9%
<b><i>Negative valence; Intrigue components:</i></b>	
<b>Article contains following:</b>	
- Specific victims of corruption who suffer significant consequences are portrayed	8%
- Presence of 'political intrigue' e.g. corrupt officials connected to other shadowy figures etc.	15%
- Description of lifestyle or personal 'excesses' of the corrupt	21%
<b><i>Analytical depth component:</i></b>	
Article includes specific discussion or analysis of causes of corruption, generally or in case at hand	63%

Table 4: Summary data, frame distribution

<i>Element / Frame (see Figure 1)</i>	All	By ownership(*)			Political cycle	
		Official	Semi-Official	Commercial	1/2011-10/2012 (Pre-XJP)	11/2012-12/2015 (Post-XJP)
	N=250	N=85	N=81	N=84	N=101	N=149
<b>Corrupt actor:</b>						
<i>Peripheral</i>	123 (49%)	63 (74%)	29 (36%)	31 (37%)	51 (50%)	73(49%)
<i>Core</i>	127 (51%)	22 (26%)	52 (64%)	53 (63%)	51 (51%)	76 (51%)
<b>Extent of corruption:</b>						
<i>Isolated</i>	82 (33%)	26 (31%)	39(48%)	17 (20%)	42 (42%)	40 (27%)
<i>Widespread</i>	169 (67%)	59 (69%)	43 (52%)	67 (80%)	59 (58%)	110 (73%)
<b>Justice:</b>						
<i>In question</i>	86 (34%)	19 (22%)	26 (32%)	41 (49%)	41 (41%)	45 (30%)
<i>Visibly served</i>	165 (66%)	66 (78%)	56 (68%)	43 (51%)	60 (59%)	105 (70%)
<b>Frame A: Peripheral &amp; Isolated</b>	<b>34 (14%)</b>	<b>17 (20%)</b>	<b>12 (15%)</b>	<b>5 (6%)</b>	<b>20 (20%)</b>	<b>14 (9%)</b>
A1 - 'justice in question'	13 (5%)	2 (2%)	6 (7%)	5 (6%)	7 (35%)	6 (43%)
A2 - 'justice visibly served'	21 (8%)	15 (18%)	6 (7%)	0 (0%)	13 (65%)	8 (57%)
<b>Frame B: Core &amp; Isolated</b>	<b>48 (19%)</b>	<b>9 (11%)</b>	<b>27 (33%)</b>	<b>12 (14%)</b>	<b>22 (22%)</b>	<b>26 (18%)</b>
B1 - 'justice in question'	10 (4%)	1 (1%)	5 (6%)	4 (5%)	4 (18%)	6 (23%)
B2 - 'justice visibly served'	38 (15%)	8 (9%)	22 (27%)	8 (10%)	18 (81%)	20 (77%)
<b>Frame C: Peripheral &amp; Widespread</b>	<b>89 (36%)</b>	<b>46 (54%)</b>	<b>17 (21%)</b>	<b>26 (31%)</b>	<b>30 (30%)</b>	<b>59 (40%)</b>
C1- 'justice in question'	35 (14%)	12 (14%)	9 (11%)	14 (17%)	15 (50%)	20 (34%)
C2 - 'justice visibly served'	54 (22%)	34 (40%)	8 (10%)	12 (14%)	15 (50%)	39 (67%)
<b>Frame D: Core &amp; Widespread</b>	<b>79 (31%)</b>	<b>13 (15%)</b>	<b>25(31%)</b>	<b>41 (49%)</b>	<b>29 (29%)</b>	<b>50 (34%)</b>
D1 - 'justice in question'	27 (11%)	4 (5%)	5 (20%)	18 (21%)	15 (52%)	12 (24%)
D2 - 'justice visibly served'	52 (21%)	9 (11%)	12 (25%)	23 (27%)	14 (48%)	38 (77%)

Table 5: Mean marginal effects from the multinomial logit for the observed choice of corruption frame in newspaper articles (N=250)

<i>Explanatory variables:</i>	Media Ownership: Semi-Official#			Media Ownership: Commercial#			Post-Xi Jinping appointment		
	Marginal effect	Standard error	Significance	Marginal effect	Standard error	Significance	Marginal effect	Standard error	Significance
<i>Dependent variable:</i>									
Pr(A1): Peripheral, Isolated, Justice in question)	.051	.033		.036	.030		-.029	.028	
Pr(A2): Peripheral, Isolated, Justice visibly served)	-.101	.049	**	-.175	.040	***	-.069	.032	**
Pr(B1): Core, Isolated, Justice in question)	.050	.029	*	.036	.021		-.001	.024	
Pr(B2): Core, Isolated, Justice visibly served)	.178	.059	***	.001	.045		-.046	.042	
Pr(C1): Peripheral, Widespread, Justice in question)	-.030	.051		.026	.055		-.016	.041	
Pr(C2): Peripheral, Widespread, Justice visibly served)	-.303	.061	***	-.26	.06	***	.11	.050	**
Pr(D1): Core, Widespread,	.015	.035		.167	.050	***	-.065	.036	*

Justice in question)									
Pr(D2): Core, Widespread, Justice visibly served)	.139	.058	**	.168	.059	**	.113	.052	**

Standard errors calculated using delta method

Significance is denoted by \*\*\*, \*\*, or \* when the p-value is ≤ 1%, 5%, or 10% respectively

# Base media ownership category is "Official"

Table 6: Raw count of articles found in full-text database of six newspapers containing keywords associated with corruption (2011-2015)\*

	People's Daily	China Inspection	Global Times	Beijing Evening	Economic Observer	21 <sup>st</sup> Century
2011	1124	2284	204	592	116	353
2012	1021	1879	595	494	124	485
2013	1127	1724	736	370	163	642
2014	1503	2499	859	742	176	620
2015	1626	2835	685	855	122	289
<b>% increase, 2011-2 to 2014-5</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>23%</b>

\* Keywords: 腐败, 贪污 or 反腐 present in article (corruption, bribery or anti-corruption)

Table 7: Probit Models: Justice visibly served and Negative valence/Intrigue framing

Explanatory variables:	Media Ownership: Semi-Official#			Media Ownership: Commercial#			Post-Xi Jinping appointment		
	Probit estimates	Standard error	Sig-nificance	Probit estimates	Standard error	Sig-nificance	Probit estimates	Standard error	Sig-nificance
<i>Dependent variable:</i>									
Justice visibly served Constant = .592 Prob > chi2 = .001	-.300	.209		-.741	.205	***	.301	.169	*
Negative valence/Intrigue framing Constant = -.481 Prob > chi2 = .009	.330	.200	*	.178	.201		-.110	.165	

Number of Observations: 250

Significance is denoted by \*\*\*, \*\*, or \* when the p-value is ≤ 1%, 5%, or 10% respectively

# Base media ownership category is "Official"

Table 8: Probit model for determinants of 'analytical depth' in corruption coverage

Explanatory variables:	Specialized or Economic Newspapers# (includes China Inspection, Economic Observer and 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Business Herald)			Post-Xi Jinping appointment		
	Probit estimates	Standard error	Significance	Probit estimates	Standard error	Significance
<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
Analytical depth Constant = .317 Prob > chi2 = .001	.525	.165	***	-.391	.170	**

Number of Observations: 250

Significance is denoted by \*\*\*, \*\*, or \* when the p-value is ≤ 1%, 5%, or 10% respectively

# Base newspaper category is all other newspapers in sample, namely: People's Daily, Global Times and Beijing Evening News