

“Lying Flat-ism”: Is the Party Under Xi “Governing People to Death”?

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In a January 2023 talk to the Central Discipline Inspection Commission, shortly after the wave of “A4 protests” that called for an end to Xi Jinping’s signature “zero-COVID” policies, the Party general secretary insisted that his “strict comprehensive governance of the Party” was not equivalent to “governing people to death.” Instead, Xi argued, it aimed to create a healthy and vibrant society, capable of fostering a political environment conducive to innovation and entrepreneurialism. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that it is having the opposite effect, both among grassroots officials as well as on society more generally. I argue that this is in part due to the attendant shift under Xi away from the incentive structures associated with so-called “performance legitimacy” during the early post-Mao era in favor of a renewed emphasis on ideological purity and loyalty to the Party’s new “core.” One such example is the rise of “lying flat” as a term of passive popular resistance that circulated widely in 2021 before it was colonized by official discourse and transformed into a broader tool of political criticism by the central authorities, who identified it with laxity, “formalism,” and incompetence, particularly at lower levels of the Party-state. As a term of political abuse deployed against officials, “lying flat” peaked under China’s “zero-COVID” struggle, which ended in 2022. I conclude that “lying flat” arose chiefly as a response to Xi’s “comprehensive strict governance,” both inside and outside the Party.

In early January 2023, when General Secretary Xi Jinping addressed the Second Plenary Session of the 20th Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), China’s handling of COVID-19 seemed to be weighing heavily on his mind. The plenary met only a few weeks after a wave of protests that had included calls for Xi Jinping’s ouster swept through thirty-nine Chinese cities at the end of November.¹ In response to the rising tide of popular dissent, the State Council rolled out the “New Ten Measures,” further walking back the regime’s “zero-COVID” policies in early December before abandoning them altogether in favor of a “let it rip” approach for which it had earlier derided other governments.² In retrospect, Xi’s January remarks to the CDIC plenary session seem defensive and freighted with health metaphors: “Various viruses that corrode the Party’s health lurk everywhere,” Xi warned. He called upon Party members to “replenish calcium and fortify [their] bones, detoxify and sterilize, cure [their] diseases and attend to [their] injuries, purge putrefaction and regenerate muscle tissue.” Invoking one of the “Four Comprehensives,”³ Xi redounded: “The purpose of comprehensively and strictly administering the Party (从严治党)⁴ is not to govern the people to death (把人管死), to make them hesitant, fearful, or dead in the water. Rather, it is to create a healthy, capable society by setting clear directions, establishing rules, improving the atmosphere, strengthening immunity, and creating a political environment conducive to entrepreneurship.”⁵ A Xinhua commentary on Xi’s comprehensive and strict administration that appeared several weeks later repeated his disavowal of “governing to death” and emphasized his aim of creating a positive “political ecology.” Xinhua added: “Especially at present, standing on the brink and shouldering new missions, what we need more than ever are ‘fierce warriors’ (猛将), ‘path-breakers’ (闯将), and ‘go-getters’ (干将).”⁶

But, by many accounts Xi's long-established preference for "comprehensive strict governance" appears to have had the opposite effect, even before his stringent "zero-COVID" policy was rolled out across the country. Instead of fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, his strict administration of the Party has reportedly induced "grassroots exhaustion" (基层疲惫),⁷ "political coma,"⁸ and "paralysis"⁹ within the ranks of Chinese officialdom, narrowing the political space for local policy experimentation¹⁰ and dampening the appetite for entrepreneurial risk-taking¹¹ at the social grassroots. Even the *Procuracy Daily* admitted in 2015 that after Xi's "high pressure anti-corruption became the new normal ... some leading cadres with issues began to suffer 'anti-corruption phobia,' panicking all day long without advancing in their work."¹² This trend worsened during the pandemic when the central leadership implemented a system of cadre accountability that was, according to official media, unprecedented in its scale and intensity (问责规模空前、力度空前). From the initial outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan in December 2019 through mid-April 2020, Hubei reportedly punished more than 3,000 Party members and cadres for dereliction of duty in carrying out epidemic prevention and control, including more than ten officials at the department and bureau levels and over 100 at the county and division levels.¹³ As early as the end of January 2020, officials across six provinces and municipalities were charged with negligence in implementing epidemic prevention measures, including for allowing ambulances to transport people suffering from COVID to hospitals that were not designated for coronavirus patients; for failing to intercept people returning from the Wuhan area promptly enough; and for not submitting the required reports by the stipulated deadlines.¹⁴ The unrelenting application of "strict accountability" (严格问责)—particularly with respect to implementing Xi's "zero-COVID" demands—saw some locales attempting to out-perform expected targets by imposing measures that retrospectively were deemed "excessive,"¹⁵ like cadres in Xiamen swabbing the mouths of fish caught by local fishermen to test for COVID¹⁶ and Tibetan officials ordering nomadic herdsmen working in remote grasslands to queue up with their livestock for mandatory PCR testing.¹⁷

Herein lies the problem: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its post-Mao leadership is widely described as relying on so-called "performance legitimacy" to sustain high levels of popular support. "Performance legitimacy" is generally associated with policies that lead to positive quality-of-life outcomes for ordinary people¹⁸ as well as to the provision of strong performance incentives capable of "increasing the credibility of rewards" to the state agents who implement them.¹⁹ In democracies, the relationship between effective government performance and legitimacy is somewhat less linear. As Lipset observes, whereas support based on government effectiveness is primarily an instrumental calculation, "legitimacy is more affective and evaluative"; as a result, "the degree of legitimacy of a democratic system may [positively] affect its capacity to survive the crises of effectiveness,"²⁰ allowing it to survive natural disasters, failed military adventures, and economic downturns intact. In non-democracies that lack institutional mechanisms for conferring bottom-up consent, the performance measures that matter are those that are imposed at the top of the system, regardless of whether such indicators succeed in conferring benefits to the majority

But insofar as "performance legitimacy" is contingent upon continued credible evidence of effectiveness, it magnifies state successes as well as official failures; by placing often elusive "deliverables" at the center of the political process, a heavy reliance on "performance legitimacy" is inherently unstable, particularly under conditions of slowing economic growth.²¹ Unsurprisingly, therefore, the CCP benefited from the surge of national pride in 2021 when the country managed to keep itself running, through strict controls over movement and a robust testing regime, largely as before the pandemic. The national economy

“rebounded in 2021 with its best growth in a decade,”²² and the population was mostly protected from the ravages of COVID. Borrowing one of the top ten social media buzzwords of 2021²³ to publicize the successes, by 2022 Beijing was deriding the weak response of foreign governments as “lying flat” (躺平) against COVID. A survey conducted that year found that most Chinese citizens saw Beijing’s successful handling of the initial stages of the pandemic as evidence of its global rise, particularly in contrast to the more chaotic responses of many Western countries.²⁴ However, having lashed itself early on to the uncompromising mast of “zero-COVID” under “strict comprehensive governance,” the Party found itself ill-prepared when the spread of new variants upended the myth of CCP exceptionalism the following year. Caught between the scissors of rapidly declining economic growth and attenuating performance incentives, the Party Center resorted to sanctions and exhortations, while also attempting to shift the blame for its ill-timed policy reversal on a new but fulminating bureaucratic malaise: “lying flat-ism” (躺平主义) among low-level officials.

From Rolling Up and Turning Inward to Lying Flat

The term “lying flat” is said to have originally appeared in 2011 in a male-dominated Baidu forum for marriage resisters (反婚吧) as a term casually signaling a netizen’s surrender to permanent bachelorhood despite social and familial pressures. It later cropped up again in 2016 in social media celebrity fan pages to signal that a media personality’s behavior had become indefensible. To “lie flat” meant “I can’t whitewash this (洗不动明星了), I’m just lying down over there and letting you laugh.”²⁵ At roughly the same time, “lying flat” was a term sometimes invoked by the “Sanhe Masters,” an online community of itinerant workers in Shenzhen’s gig economy who purportedly advocated “working one day so that you can play for three” (做一天可以玩三天) as a strategy of passive defiance against systemic exploitation.²⁶ The April 5, 2021, suicide of a 51-year-old long-haul truck driver after traffic enforcement officers impounded his truck and fined him 2,000 yuan when his vehicle’s internal tracking device disconnected, triggered a large-scale online discussion about precarity in contemporary China.²⁷ News of his suicide revived popular concerns about “involution” (内卷, a term popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz to describe how centuries of intensifying wet-rice cultivation in Java had produced ever-greater social complexity without yielding either significant technological advancement or corresponding increases in output).²⁸ Anthropologist Xiang Biao describes “involution” in Chinese cyberspace as “the experience of being locked in a competition that one ultimately knows is meaningless ... an endless cycle of self-flagellation.” As Yi-ling Liu recently observed, it is “acceleration without a destination, progress without a purpose, Sisyphus spinning the wheels of a perpetual-motion Peloton.”²⁹

Into this broader online discussion, a netizen named “Good-hearted traveler” (好心的旅行家) intervened by posting a brief autobiographical comment entitled “Lying Flat is Justice” (躺平即是正義) that quickly went viral. “Good-hearted traveler,” a former factory worker in his 20s named Luo Huazhong, admitted that he had not held a job for more than two years, but he did not feel that anything was wrong with his lifestyle. A vocational college graduate who had been unable to find stable employment in China’s increasingly dismal and competitive job market, Luo once biked 1,300 miles from his home in Sichuan to Tibet and back, picking up temporary jobs whenever he could. One of his gigs had him playing a corpse in a Chinese film. After some time, Luo ended up moving in with his parents and surrendering to his fate.³⁰ He told one interviewer that he had spent his trip from Chengdu to Lhasa lost deep in thought about the meaning of life. Embracing a position of radical philosophical skepticism, he invited others to do the same. “I doubted the meaning of work and of the existing order; of

course, you are also free to doubt my ‘lying flat.’” Unable to find any work that brought him satisfaction, Luo finally decided to forego his aspirations of one day having a career and a family.³¹ He wrote that after having withdrawn from the rat race, he found both peace and independence. He suggested that others might do likewise. “I can just sleep in my own wooden barrel and bask in the sun like Diogenes, or I can live in a cave and contemplate ‘Logos’ like Heraclitus. ... Lying flat is my wise man’s movement. Only by lying flat can man be the measure of all things.”³²

Luo’s message clearly struck a chord with online readers. Within days, netizens had set up a host of new discussion fora on the Douban social networking platform, including “tribes” devoted to “lying flat,” “flat-lying,” “lying down,” and even “surrendering to our fate.”³³ Some even created online courses, such as the “Introduction to Lying Flat Studies,” which claimed to cover the “past and present state” of “lying flat” as “a life philosophy that abandons all striving and advocates the merits of a low-desire lifestyle.”³⁴ On Zhihu, another popular social media platform, “lying flatism” (躺平主义) was described as a practice that called on young people to observe the “Five Don’ts”: “don’t buy a house, don’t buy a car, don’t get married, don’t have children, and don’t consume”; the goal for its most ardent participants was “to maintain a minimalist standard of living and to refuse to become other people’s money-making machines—and to refuse to be exploited as slaves.”³⁵ “Lying flatism” was characterized by some as a form of “‘non-violent’ non-cooperation” with social pressures that could only produce more “involution”³⁶ and by others as a form of “helpless activism” (无奈的积极主义) in the face of the vast economic inequality.³⁷ Some netizens incorporated another popular meme in Chinese cyberspace: that of garlic chives (韭菜), as a metaphor for “those ordinary Chinese people who are constantly lured to participate in all kinds of economic activities but whose investments are destined to be consumed by the establishment.” Netizens linked the two together to argue that “[f]or the garlic chives, the only way to avoid being harvested by the sickle is to lay flat.”³⁸

Sensing a social movement in the making, official media outlets quickly sprang into action: within days, *Guangming Daily* rushed to assure its readers that “lying flat” was an attitude held by a slim minority of netizens and that for cultural reasons China could never be home to a “low desire society.”³⁹ *Southern Daily* pointedly criticized such defeatist attitudes as “shameful” and as a “poisonous chicken soup [for the soul]” in a commentary that was immediately circulated by Xinhua. “If we cry ‘involution’ whenever we encounter pressures and we want to ‘lie flat’ when facing setbacks, how can we ever hope to change our lives?”⁴⁰ The *Global Times* added that, with China at a critical stage on its long road to national rejuvenation, the country will ensure that its youth are “invariably awakened at dawn by their own alarm clocks.”⁴¹ On May 27, the Communist Youth League’s Central Committee posted a message on Weibo entitled “Contemporary Youth Have Never Chosen to Lie Flat.” Pointing to the army of young Chinese serving as anti-epidemic workers (大白), youthful PLA recruits, and junior research scientists, the Youth League proclaimed that “In strong winds and waves, this young generation lives up to their mission and the country. They have faith, dreams, grit, and dedication. They will never choose to ‘lie flat’!”⁴²

With the official and state-connected media ramping up what appeared to be a coordinated campaign,⁴³ Luo Huazhong’s original post, “Lying Flat is Justice,” disappeared from Chinese cyberspace at the end of May. The term “lying flat,” which at one point ranked as one of the hottest terms on WeChat, was banned. Douban, once home to a proliferation of “tribes” devoted to the study and practice of “lying flat” (including the “lying flat tribe”躺平组, which boasted nearly 10,000 active members on May 30, 2021),⁴⁴ closed down nearly all such

groups. As of June 1, one of the few that still remained was the “Lying Down and Standing Up Mutual Aid Alliance” (躺平後起立互助聯盟), a group that claimed to provide emotional support and encouragement for those seeking to break out of a “flat-lying” lifestyle and to ease back into the competitive world of work.⁴⁵ On June 1, a *Deutsche Welle* reporter who sought to purchase a once-popular “lying flat” logo T-shirt found that Alibaba’s Taobao, the popular online shopping platform, had pulled all such associated products from its online shelves and had replaced them with shirts emblazoned with slogans like “New Youth” (新青年), “Serve the People” (为人民服务), and “Roll Up Your Sleeves and Work Harder” (撸起袖子加油干).⁴⁶

When, a few months later, Xi Jinping addressed the Central Financial and Economic Work Commission in August, he touted his “Common Prosperity” approach as the way to foster “an environment of economic development in which everyone participates and avoids both ‘involution’ and ‘lying flat,’” and he called on the entire Party to “solidly promote” it.⁴⁷ On one of the final days of 2021, a *Guangming Daily* commentary referred to “lying flat” as the “discordant beat” of those who, having succumbed to the “complacency of material abundance,” had become hesitant about the potential “difficulties ahead” before the country’s “development would ascend to even newer heights.” The author reminded his readers of the many moments of national crisis in the past—including the CCP’s First National Congress and Deng Xiaoping’s momentous “reform and opening” decision—in which “lives that were hanging by a thread were turned into opportunities to create greater glory.”⁴⁸

“Lying Flat” Redivivus

Yet, not long after “lying flat-ism” and its proponents were routed by the official censors, the term came roaring back to life in official Party discourse, reborn as a derisive rebuke aimed at targets both inside and outside the country. With the circulation of new COVID variants, discussions within China regarding a possible shift from the initial absolute “zero-tolerance” (绝对清零) policy to one of “dynamic clearing” (动态清零) began to percolate online during the summer of 2021.⁴⁹ The central government, however, not only appeared unwilling to adapt its original approach but even mocked and derided other governments, using the “lying flat” discourse it had suppressed only a few months earlier.⁵⁰ On the opening day of the Beijing Olympics, *People’s Daily* railed against the Hong Kong SAR government for allegedly allowing Omicron cases to rise, claiming that “dynamic clearing” was the only “scientific choice” for combating COVID-19. Addressing unnamed persons who questioned the approach of the central government in Beijing, *People’s Daily* equated any “so-called ‘co-existing with the virus’ approach as a ‘lying flat’ strategy” that would lead to the rapid spread of the virus and would “shake the confidence of all of Hong Kong society in fighting the epidemic.”⁵¹ Three days later, Chinese Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) member and pro-Beijing think-tank director Cheung Chi-kong lambasted Hong Kong officials in general, and Chief Executive Carrie Lam in particular, for being “opportunists” who half-heartedly pursued “dynamic clearing” while secretly believing the British and American models of co-existence with the coronavirus to be “superior and civilized.” “‘Lying flat’ and ‘co-existing with the virus,’” Cheung railed, “is definitely not the choice of most Hong Kong people, and this ‘elite faction’ cannot possibly represent Hong Kong, let alone the whole of the Hong Kong people.”⁵²

In May, after the city of Shanghai was already in hard lockdown for more than a month, *People’s Daily* took to singling out the governments of the UK, Denmark, Sweden, Norway,

and Iceland for having chosen to completely “lie flat” in the face of the Omicron variant, “squeezing medical resources” and risking “long-term and sustained negative impacts on social and economic operations.”⁵³ Two days later, on May 18, the paper reminded its readers that Xi Jinping had earlier impressed upon the Politburo Standing Committee the importance of overcoming “contempt (轻视), indifference (无所谓), and self-righteousness (自以为是), and the necessity of always keeping a clear mind and unwaveringly adhering to the policy of ‘dynamic clearing’” in the fight against COVID. China Medical University’s Ma Xiaochun added that, in putting the lives of the people first, China “did not choose to ‘lie flat’ just hoping to avoid an uptick in serious illnesses and deaths,” but instead it had acted to “ensure the people’s health and safety.”⁵⁴ The following day, delivering the intended coup de grace, the paper noted that although the World Health Organization had repeatedly urged governments around the world to remain vigilant against the dangers of COVID, “the facts have proven that the ‘lying flat’ approach adopted by some Western countries will not eliminate the epidemic” and in fact they were putting the entire world at greater risk of future waves of reinfection.⁵⁵

A new triple round of *People’s Daily* warnings appeared in October 2022, days before the opening of the 20th Party Congress. Beginning on October 10th, the first of three “Zhongyin” (仲音) editorials successively appeared on Page 2 of the paper: on October 12, “‘Lying Flat’ Is Not Advisable; ‘Lying Flat and Winning’ is Impossible” insisted that countries that had reopened had only done so “precisely because they had failed to control the epidemic in a timely and effective way during the early stages, and therefore they had lost the opportunity to adopt ‘dynamic clearing.’” The editorial concluded resoundingly that “‘lying flat’ is indeed no way out” of the pandemic.⁵⁶ With the publication of the third editorial, the Party’s propaganda effort rounded off the sequence: “lying flat” had been effectively transformed from a term signaling the passive resistance of the grassroots into a political cudgel that Party combatants could wield against those deemed incompetent, disloyal, or non-compliant.

Fighting Formalism

Xi’s distaste for “lying flat” is hardly surprising. In official sources, Xi is lauded as someone who was deeply committed to the unyielding imposition of discipline early on in his career, punishing perceived inaction (不作为) and laxity (怠业) among grassroots cadres in Zhejiang and Fujian.⁵⁷ He is said to have only promoted subordinates who “dared to shoulder their duties determinedly” and “faced up to problems head-on and assumed responsibility without avoidance or shirking.” He developed a reputation of singling out for public ridicule cadres who were chiefly concerned with being seen as “peace-makers” (太平管) and “good old boys” (老好人). According to Xi, officials who meekly invite neither praise nor blame deserve to be “despised by the masses.”⁵⁸ After Xi became Party general secretary, in keeping with his diktat regarding “comprehensive strict governance,” as early as December 2014, Baoding municipality began disciplining officials for non-action (不作业).⁵⁹ The Supreme People’s Procuratorate announced several months later that in assigning cadres punishment it would treat inaction on par with political corruption.⁶⁰ Beyond assessments of bureaucratic performance, as early as 2013 Xi had declared that the *style* of cadre compliance would also be worthy of investigation, naming “formalism” (形式主义) as one of the “four forms of decadence” (四风) to be opposed, along with “bureaucratism” (官僚主义), “hedonism” (享乐主义), and “extravagance” (奢靡).⁶¹ “Formalism” came to be defined as approaching problems in a “desultory” (作风飘浮) manner without ultimately solving them, feigning effort (工作不实) by overwhelming oneself and others with a “mountain of documents and a sea of meetings” (文山会海), generating “slick” reports, and hankering after recognition, avarice, and other

related issues.⁶² In more recent years, “formalism” has also been closely associated with bureaucratic “involution” and “lying flat.” In official Party discourse, “involution” can refer to a situation in which officials are only contributing incrementally to the work of a department or a government unit; officials who “lie flat” and do nothing as well as cadres who either do little or engage in their duties on a merely superficial level are both guilty of formalism.⁶³ Seeking to move beyond such bureaucratic shortcomings, in 2019 the Central Committee’s General Office issued new regulations on cadre assessments that included specific sanctions for officials with “insufficient entrepreneurial spirit” (创业精气神不够), for those who “choose the easy way out and shun the burdens” (拈轻怕重), and for those who “shrink from direct conflict, shy away from real risks, and avoid responsibility for their failures to act” (不敢直面矛盾、不愿动真碰硬, 不担当不作为的).⁶⁴

The problem of alleged formalistic behavior on the part of lower-level bureaucrats predated the rising tide of the demands placed on them by Beijing’s uncompromising “zero-COVID” approach. At a 2016 press conference held by the State Council Information Office, a reporter from *Keizai* observed that “some officials in China have been so demoralized by the anti-corruption campaign that they have even become somewhat negative about attracting investment and communicating with foreign countries,”⁶⁵ a claim that was refuted vigorously. As Wang Enxue, a lecturer at Yunnan University’s School of Politics and Public Administration, observed in 2017, the sharp increase in, and normalization of, political and ideological work under Xi, including meeting demands that they consistently demonstrate innovative and entrepreneurial energy, had greatly increased the burdens on grassroots officials.⁶⁶ CASS’s Fang Ning noted in 2019 that the problem of what is frequently identified in the media as “grassroots formalism” is chiefly related to the proliferating demands and burdens imposed by superordinate levels combined with the lack of local resources to meet such targets: “How can there not be formalism when [grassroots cadres] are not in a position to carry out [such tasks]?”⁶⁷

Nevertheless, after the arrival of the pandemic, the central leadership made it clear that there would be no tolerance for any “formalistic” local implementation of Xi’s “absolute zero-COVID” policy. As early as January 24, 2020, only weeks after the initial COVID outbreak in Wuhan, China’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention activated a dynamic surveillance system for coronavirus detection that required all subnational units to report cases on a daily basis via an online portal.⁶⁸ Three days later, the Party Central Committee met and determined that pandemic prevention and control would be prioritized as national-level goals and would be integrated into the cadre performance evaluation system.⁶⁹ However, concerns were raised almost immediately from grassroots cadres who complained about the additional layers of work involved to meet the burdens of Xi’s signature “zero-COVID” approach: “There are more than a dozen reports to file each day, the forms change time and again, and four or five versions must be completed”; “Progress in [epidemic] prevention and control, supervision reports, summaries, merits, data to be added one after the other, and each article totaling more than 500 words.”⁷⁰ Cadres who failed to meet the proliferating expectations of the work of epidemic prevention unsurprisingly were branded as guilty of—and frequently disciplined for—“formalism” or “lying flat.”⁷¹ One Xinhua investigation into how formalistic requirements might impede anti-COVID work describes grassroots cadres being asked to fill out and submit a dozen forms a day, often with the same content; epidemic prevention staff were so busy receiving inspection visits from superordinate officials that they didn’t even have a chance to hand out a mask or a bottle of disinfectant to any local residents; and, in another locale, grassroots workers were required to spend up to three hours a day cheering for hospital medical staff instead of carrying out other

tasks, such as seeing to the needs of residents in lockdown or quarantine.⁷² Such measures, according to Li Zhuoran, appear to skirt the boundaries of what is recognized by the Party-state as formalism, but they are likely converging on what Iza Ding has dubbed “performative governance.”⁷³

The chief cause of formalistic and merely performative compliance at the grassroots, Fang Ning concludes in a June 2020 essay, is “peak management” (顶格管理) that imposes an “upper-bounds” operating style of administration characterized by the “four mosts” (四最): “handling matters most comprehensively, to the highest standards, meeting the most stringent requirements, and at the fastest speed.” But the imposition of impossible demands from the top, Fang points out, wrongly presumes the existence of optimal conditions in place and sufficient resources across every level of an organization or state structure, narrows the adaptive capacity of a system, and increases the likelihood of short-termism among local agents seeking to meet unrealistic deadlines for the reporting of results. Grassroots coping mechanisms—derided by “peak managers” as “formalism”—are the inevitable result.⁷⁴

“Governing People to Death,” But With Loving Kindness?

So-called “performance legitimacy” as practiced by the post-Mao leadership relied heavily upon the role of local and grassroots officials to sustain record levels of economic growth for over three decades along with the popular support that rapid development had secured. Xi Jinping’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, in a speech marking the 30th anniversary of reform and opening up, extolled the importance of “giving full play to the initiative of the people” (发挥人民首创精神) in spurring the so-called Chinese economic miracle.⁷⁵ As has been well-documented, early in the post-Mao era central leaders delegated administrative authority and offered materialized performance incentives to state agents at the grassroots to pilot a wide variety of reforms, seeking to jump-start economic growth, attract foreign direct investment, and diversify local production.⁷⁶ Local officials were accordingly granted a high degree of local discretion and oversight from superordinates was relaxed, inspiring local state activism and thereby lowering the systemic risks posed by pursuing reform-oriented strategies. However, this also entailed intensifying negative externalities, like rising corruption, environmental degradation, and skyrocketing inequality.⁷⁷

The Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, established after the 18th Party Congress’s Third Plenum in November 2013 with Xi as chair, signaled a definitive shift in direction away from the successful dynamics of the early post-Mao era. Xi instituted a self-proclaimed breakthrough (重大突破)⁷⁸ program of “top-level design” that has reoriented the focus of local governance toward the Center and has greatly reduced the scope of authority of local officials. Suggesting in 2014 that the existing system of performance incentives required revamping, Xi Jinping told leading cadres that all officials needed “to consider problems and carry out their work from the vantage point of the Party and the nation’s overall interests, not only being selective but taking whatever they need and even going so far as to serve local interests in the name of reform.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, measures passed since 2013 have aimed at greatly strengthening mechanisms of supervision and inspection and reining in the latitude of local state agents to carry out pilot reforms and policy experiments. In the name of “transferring pressures to all levels” (层层传导压力),⁸⁰ performance indicators for local officials have been realigned to comply with orders set by the Center; Party-wide “thematic education campaigns” have been stepped up to institute “unified thinking” and to “unify opinion” at the grassroots. Speaking to the second meeting of the 18th CDIC in January 2013, Xi Jinping said that the aim of such measures was “to get

rid of local and departmental protectionism and sectionalism” (地方和部门保护主义, 本位主义). He added that, in keeping with “strict governance,” the Party leadership “will never tolerate ‘policies from above, countermeasures from below’ (上有政策、下有对策), nor will we allow refusal, compromise, choice, or flexibility in implementing decisions made by the Center.”⁸¹ Compliance has been policed by the longest and most thoroughgoing anti-corruption campaign in PRC history.

Thus, the net effect of Xi’s “comprehensive strict governance” has effectively up-ended the successful model of the early post-Mao years, replacing it with a menacing admixture of stiff sanctions, anti-corruption prosecutions, and political exhortations, and arguably further slowing the Chinese economy. In the end, it may well be economic imperatives that finally signal to Xi that the outer limit has been reached. In August 2023, after a high-profile collective study session on “Xi Jinping’s Economic Thought and Efforts to Promote High-Quality Economic and Social Development,” leaders of the Party’s disciplinary apparatus recommitted to “comprehensive strict governance,” but with “loving kindness” (厚爱). Li Xi, the head of the CDIC, concluded that high-quality economic and social development could not take place without clearer distinctions between deliberate cadre wrongdoings and unintentional infractions of Party procedures. He cited numerous recent cases in which cadres had been either falsely accused of wrongdoings or framed for misconduct under the unrelenting anti-corruption campaign, including 574 such cases in Hunan and 594 in Heilongjiang. “Comprehensive strict management,” Li reminded those present, “does not aim to govern people to death but rather to foster a healthy political ecology and a good environment for entrepreneurs to start new businesses.” Local cadres needed to experience the Party’s love so to encourage them to carry out their duties, maintain their enthusiasm on the job, and confidently take entrepreneurial risks.⁸²

But neither innovation nor entrepreneurial energy can be policed into existence from above. Perhaps one key lesson that the central leadership in Beijing might draw from its misadventure with the stubborn “lying flatists” and “grassroots formalists” is that the Xi-era Party-state cannot generate economic vibrancy and technological innovation simply by fiat: it must loosen its death grip on the reins of power.

About the Contributor

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