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Gender and Corruption – insights from China

Introduction

Over the recent years, the involvement of women in corruption scandals, both as officials and as wives or mistresses of corrupt male officials, has attracted the spotlight of media coverage. In September 2012, just prior to the opening of the 18th Communist Party of China Congress in Beijing, Bo Xilai, the former party chief of Chongqing, was sacked due to, among other things, corruption. His wife Gu Kailai received a suspended death sentence for having killed a British businessman by poisoning. (Huffington Post, 2012). Early in January 2013, a high official named Yi Junqing was stripped of his office after one of his mistresses had exposed their affair on a blog. Yi, the Director of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the CCP Central Committee, was removed under the charge of “improper life style”. (Women of China, 2013). However, he is not alone. The Guardian reports, “a blog post on 30 December accused the party secretary of an impoverished county in Yunnan province of purchasing 10 SUVs and getting drunk with a group of attractive women”; “the vice-mayor of a small city in Guangdong province lost his job after a subordinate exposed his connection to a local drug ring. Blog posts accuse the deputy chief of the province’s Land Resource Bureau of having affairs with 47 mistresses and receiving almost £2.8bn in bribes”; and “Chinese media have accused the twenty-something daughter of a former

housing official in Zhengzhou, capital of central Henan province, of owning 11 flats. Her 27-year-old brother may own as many as 14. Her family is under investigation". (The Guardian, 2013). The Times of India cited a recent report by Renmin University in China, saying that "about 95 per cent of officials being investigated have mistresses". (Times of India, 2013).

Contrary to the salient and frequent exposure of women in corruption in the media, scholarly research on corruption in China, internationally as well as domestically, has up to today rendered women, and hence the question of gender, to little relevance. Generic corruption studies attempt to "answer all the questions that pertain to the phenomenon: why does it happen (causes); how does it happen (patterns, forms); what effects does it have (consequences, impacts); and how to control it (solutions, remedies)" (Lü, 2000: 3). While recognizing that corruption "has spread since the reform period" (Rooij, 2005: 293), the latest studies of corruption in China mainly "try to determine the origin of this development" (*ibid.*). According to these studies, the cause of corruption spreading in reform China is identified as: 1. the development of market economy, specifically the dual price mechanism and the influx of foreign investment that "created graft opportunities" (*ibid.*); 2. the "relatively slow increase in public officials' incomes"; 3. the "weak regulatory system that allows corruption to grow"; 4. the "incomplete political reform that resulted in a lack of checks and balances"; 5. the "lack of ethics against corruption due to the changes in ideology" and "the lack of 'commercial morality in economic life'" (Rooij, 2005: 294). Not only is the word "gender" completely missing from these studies, but also the question of whether corruption is a gendered problem remains under investigated and hence unanswered. The contrast between women in corruption as a very hot topic in the Chinese (as well as overseas) media and the salience in academia leaves us some important questions:

Is corruption a gendered problem in China? Does gender have any implications for corruption? If so, does the role or behavior of men and women differ when it comes to power abuse and corruption? Are women cleaner or more honest than men? Are male government officials more susceptible to corruption than female officials? Or which sex in China can be more counted upon than the other as the reliable combatant in the fight against corruption? In this paper, we attempt to bring "gender" in by asking and exploring the relevance of gender in corruption and in understanding the very nature of the corruption problem. Our aim is to bridge

the gap between gender-women-focused media coverage of corruption and the complete ignorance of gender in academic research on corruption in China. In order to do so, we will in the following divide the paper into three sections. Section one engages in a theoretical discussion on the role of women in corruption. We introduce a bouquet of theories and deliberate on the relevance of these theories in explaining and understanding the role of gender in corruption in China. Section two presents an array of empirical evidence from China and a look into the involvement of women in corruption as government officials; wives, daughters, family members of male officials; and as mistresses of government officials. Section three summarizes our findings and theoretical reflections on the role of gender in corruption and anti-corruption based on the empirics from China.

Theories of Gender and Corruption

Theories of gender and corruption in general can be divided into two camps: one can be termed as the “idealistic” camp and the other the “realistic” camp. The idealistic camp views women as the more ethic and greater responsibility-sensed sex and hence less corrupt, or less tolerant to corruption behavior (Swamy et al. 2001; Dollar et al. 2001). Studies in this camp shows that “women are less involved in bribery, and are less likely to condone bribe-taking”, and “corruption is less severe where women hold a large share of parliament seats and senior positions in the government, bureaucracy, and comprise a larger share of the labor force” (Swamy et al. 2001: 25). The study by Dollar et al. also “finds a very high level of raw correlation between low corruption scores and relatively high numbers of women in parliaments” (Goetz, 2007: 93), indicating that “women may have higher standards of ethical behavior and be more concerned with the common good” (Dollar et al. 2001: 427). This view has also a clear reflection in the 2001 report by the World Bank, “Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice”. The report found that “societies where women have greater rights and participate more in public life... have cleaner business and governments and enjoy more productive economies” (quoted from Sung, 2006: 139).

The realistic camp sees the perception of women as the “fairer and cleaner” sex as a myth and is highly skeptical towards the assumed corruption-reducing effect of women and their probity. A study by Esarey and Chirillo finds “evidence that the relationship between gender and

corruption differs by institutional context. Where corruption is stigmatized, women will be less tolerant of corruption and less likely to participate compared to men. But if 'corrupt' behaviors are an ordinary part of governance supported by political institutions, there will be no corruption gender gap" (Esarey and Chirillo, 2012: 24). Alhassan-Alolo's article concludes that "women may not prove less corrupt in the public sector if corrupt opportunities and networks are not restrained. Also, the very gender system, which is used to justify women's proclivity to less corrupt behavior and subsequent integration into the public sector, could itself be the source of corruption as women attempt to fulfill their gender roles" (Alhassan-Alolo, 2007: 227). According to Sung, "Control over resources and influence makes corruption possible and attractive", and "in theory, the redistribution of political power triggered by the political emancipation of women should not change the general prevalence of corrupt incidents because the overall levels of motivation and opportunities for corruption remain the same". Sung even forecasts that "an increase in the proportion of appointed and elected female officials in government should increase the number of corrupt female officials and simultaneously decrease the number of corrupt male officials" (Sung, 2006: 140).

The evidence we collected from China shows that women do participate in corruption, if not in equally big statistic numbers, then at least in a very identical manner and behavioral patterns. These pieces of evidence attest the corruptibility of female power holders and contradict the assumption of women being the "cleaner and fairer" sex in politics. When conditions and opportunities are equally present and control or monitoring are equally lacking, women in power do seek private interests and personal gains by manipulating the power that the public has invested in their hands in a similar manner to men. Additionally, women in the vicinity of power do seek the maximization of their economic and career-wise benefits either through familial relations or by sex-power exchange. Thus, although China is a country with a high rate of participation by women in public life, as the 2001 World Bank report described, the prospect of a clean government is nevertheless far away on the horizon. The "more women, the lesser corruption" correlation seems to be an illusion, not a reality.

Whether women are clean or not, we need theories to shed a light on the various mechanisms that drive one into corruptive behaviors. In other words, we need to explain why the corruptibility of women is not

necessarily lesser than men and why the behavioral difference of gender in corruption is not as striking as the idealistic camp has suggested. These theories of explanation can be identified at two levels:

At the contextual level, we found theories of transition economics relevant to our understanding of why corruption occurs on such a big scale as it is in reform China and why it involves both men and women. According to these theories, the transition to a market economy has altered both the goal of life and the degree of social and political control, fashioning a new overall context for living and social mobility. Zhang states, “When Chinese Communists worshiped the ‘social poor’, the social constraints were relatively strong, opportunities were relatively low, and motivations were relatively weak for bribery and corruption. However, as China has been transforming to a market economy with the tenet of “getting rich is glorious”, official power is becoming a major means for “poor” officials to achieve the goals of getting rich as the old measure of political control lose their power. The flourishing bribery and corruption among officials are a reflection of this ‘social anomic’” (Zhang, in Liu et al. 2001: 33–34). Iwasaki and Suzuki also point out that “corruption began to take place more for self-interest than as socially necessary evil in the former socialist states... in the process of systematic transformation to a capitalist market economy”. Corruption “has become more widespread in the transition economies” (Iwasaki and Suzuki, 2012: 54).

At the institutional or cultural level we found theories postulating the unlikelihood of a notable gender gap in corruption when corrupt behaviors “are an ordinary part of governance supported by political institutions” (Esarey and Chirillo, 2012: 24); when ‘collective graft’ and ‘organizational corruption’ is widespread (Lü, 2000; Ngo, 2008;); and when social culture ties importance to “personal networks, reciprocity, and gift giving” (Rooij, 2005: 294). Specifically, we found three theories that illuminate the impact of institutionalized corruption culture and praxis on individuals. One is the DAO theory, which stems from the field of criminology and is used to explain “the process through which an individual comes to engage in criminal behavior”. It argues that “opportunities and networks of criminal behavior are critical determinants of an individual’s engagement in a criminal action. In other words, people who commit crime not only have frequent interaction with those who condone such behavior, but also have the opportunity to do so” (Sutherland and Cressey, 1977: 77–79, quoted from (Alhassan-Alolo, 2007: 229). One is the social

role theory, according to which “an individual’s (public servant) behavior is influenced by: (a) the individual’s cognition of an appropriate behavior for a person occupying his/her position; (b) the individual’s perceptions of expectations that others hold for him/her as an occupant of a given role; (c) the individual’s perceived role pressures-fears of sanctions if she/he deviates from the expectations” (Price, 1975, quoted from (Alhassan-Alolo, 2007: 229). Then there is the gender role theory, which shows that when women go along with corruption, it may be because women “feel greater pressure to conform to existing norms about corruption” (Esarey and Chirillo, 2012: 2). They are “more averse to the risks of violating political norms”, as “gender discrimination makes violating institutional norms a riskier proposition for women than men” (Esarey and Chirillo, 2012: 24).

Although these theories offer a reasonably convincing explanation for why women can go corrupt, their primary focus is on the large outer environment and the impact that this environment has on female individuals. We argue that in order to give a fuller account of the role in corruption that we have, we need a theory at the individual level to help us to catch the “agency” aspect of corruption and understand the choice of individuals. In other words, we decline to view the participation of females in corruption as merely a result of passive exposure to a corrupt environment and the gradual erosion of the moral nobility of an individual by this environment. Our concern is what makes an individual woman to engage in corruption while the consequence of corruption is obviously severe? What does corruption mean to her and what goal will she achieve through engaging in corruptive activities?

In this study we propose the theory of chaotic capital/resource acquisition to shed a light on the link between a corruptive environment and the active choice of the corrupted individuals. By “chaotic capital/resource acquisition” we mean the almost anarchical state of resource flow towards the rich, male or powerful end and the lack of effective control over the resource distribution in society. The implication of this theory is two-fold. For female government officials, corruption might be the only chance for them to redirect the flow of economic resources (usually into the pocket of powerful males) and get their share of the “cake”. For women in general, gender discrimination and the sexualization of women on the job market obstructs their opportunity to equally advance along the career ladder with men. This diverts them to focus on individual-based strategies, and with the utilization of female sexual power they might be able to

attain huge economic gains that they normally would not be able to get on the job market. To align with a corrupt male official provides a short cut to a comfortable and respectable material life.

Here we bring in the theory of sexual capital to shed further light on the nexus of power-sex-money exchange. Sexual capital “refers to a person’s resources, competencies and endowments that provide status as sexual agents within a field” (Farrer, 2010: 75). According to Davis, “sexual attractiveness”, as a value, “can be traded for economic and social advantage” (Davis, 1966: 324). In a pairing system, it “tends to involve an exchange of female attractiveness for male money” due to the fact that “men have greater economic resources than women” (Martin, 2006: 110). The convertibility between social, economic status and sexual attractiveness, though also existing during the socialist period, becomes much more open, effective and widespread in reformed China. The development of a market economy, combined with a sexual revolution (Farrer, 2006; Evans, 1997; Pan, 1993, 1995; Li 2003a, 2003b) has capitalized sex and sexual attractiveness, making sex and sexual pleasure a commodity that has a price and can be traded (Yue, 2004). At the same time, the sexual competence and buying power of men has been greatly strengthened due to the rapid accumulation and concentration of economic and political resources in their hands. Government officials, through the acceptance of bribes, rent-seeking, embezzlement and other corruption activities, have become a new rich and hence powerful buyer on the sex market. They add to the already visible wealthy businessmen and cultural elite, prosperous and exotic foreigners as well as overseas Chinese citizens (Farrer, 2010).

The Participation in Corruption by Women in China

In the following, we shall look into the cases of corruption involving women. Two questions of clarification before we proceed. One, due to the space limit, we allow ourselves to evade a detailed discussion of the “corruption” concept. Corruption, in this paper, refers to the misdeeds that either have been deemed or generally are deemed as corruption, involving typically the “misuse of public authority for private interests” (Rooij, 2005: 292). Two, this study is based on actual corruption cases, not on cross-national corruption statistics. As so, it is not our intension to discuss the exact sexual ratio of corruption in statistic terms. As a matter of fact, such statistics are hard to find in China. Common sense tells

one that far more male officials than female officials have been caught for corruption, though we may caution against the conclusion that men are more corruptible than women since the higher occurrence of corruption among male officials may be attributed to the fact that far more men than women are found in politics and powerful positions. In the following, we provide evidence of participation by women, direct or indirect, in corruption as government officials, wives, daughters and family members, and as mistresses of male government officials.

The participation of women in corruption as government officials

Corruption existed in the Maoist era. In the reform era, however, both the “forms, extent and characteristics of corruption have changed greatly...” (Dai, 2010: 59). Over the past thirty years or more, several tens of thousands of corruption cases are prosecuted on a yearly basis, a testimony of the scale and gravity of the. The number of prosecuted corruption cases in 1999, 2000 and 2001, for example, is respectively 38,382, 45,113 and 36,447, involving respectively 2,200, 2,680 and 2,670 government officials at the county-level and above (See Rooij, 2005: 304). Since these figures are not gender-divided, it is impossible to detect the gender ratio and balance in these corruption cases. The general feeling is that the overwhelming majority of these crime cases are committed by male officials.

But female officials have also begun to catch the headline of media reports and arouse public sensations in corruption scandals over the recent years. The following list contains the names of the 17 female officials who were convicted and prosecuted for corruption since 2000: Zhang Meifang (张美芳), Zhao Wenjuan (赵文娟), Li Qihong (李启红), Shang jun (尚军), Yang Xiuzhu (杨秀珠), LuoYaping (罗亚平), Jiang Yanping (蒋艳萍), An Huijun (安惠君), Han Guizhi (韩桂芝), Liu Guangming (刘光明), Zhao Shunyi (赵顺义), Jin Hong (靳红), Zhang Guaiping (张改萍), Lao Derong (劳德容), Gu Huijuan (顾慧娟) and Dong Jinting (董金亭). In his study of corruption in contemporary China, Dai categorizes the main forms of corruption in China that not only share “the primary characteristics of corruption in other countries”, but also characterize the “transitional Chinese style that reflects its different social, cultural and political background” (Dai, 2010: 61). These include: 1. “No. 1 leader corruption” (meaning the main responsible person in a party committee or a govern-

ment); 2. “Personnel Management Corruption”, that is, cash for jobs; 3. “Public Project Corruption”; 4. “Examining and Approval Power Corruption”; and 5. “Collective Practiced Bribery Corruption” (*ibid.*). We then found an evident manifestation of all of these forms of power misuse in the corruption cases against these female officials. First of all, they all occupy a powerful position within the system of their jurisdiction and are either major decision-makers or gateway keepers. Within these cases, 11 of them were in “chief” positions (the number 1 leader) while the remaining 6 were in “deputy” (secondary) positions. People in these positions have often concentrated and unconstrained power due the (still) lack of checks and balances as well as transparency in the decision-making process, and the corruption behavior is often a result of the self-indulgence of the power-holder in this kind of concentrated and unconstrained power. One of the women convicted for corruption, Lao Derong, formerly the number 1 leader of the Energy Group in Shenzhen, confessed that her transmutation into corruption was probably due to the fact that she was in a too powerful position that allowed overly concentrated power in her hands.

We then divide these women into four sub-categories according to their job content in order to show what kind of power they have in specific and how this power became a source of corruption and abuse. As indicated by the following table, five of them reside in the number 1 position in either government financial or accounting departments at different levels, having both direct access to public funds and supreme power over managing public funds. The major form of corruption they committed was embezzlement. Two of them were former heads of a local government department dealing with land resources and urban infrastructure development. They typically committed typically “public project corruption” form of corruption by taking bribes from land and public project contractors, so the power regarding and use and the distribution of public projects became a source for their personal economic gains. The remaining ten women were heads or deputy heads of a party or government institutions, as well as directors of large state-owned enterprises. They held all-round power and influence on basically every aspect of their organization, and hence committed various kinds of corruption of, such as “No.1 leader corruption”, “Personnel Management Corruption”, “Examining and Approval Power Corruption” and “Collective Practiced Bribery Corruption”. Han Guizhi, former Deputy Secretary of the Heilongjiang Provincial Party Committee and Chairman of the Heilongjiang Provincial Political

Consultative Congress, for instance, traded her personnel management of power for money, offering positions and promotions to lesser officials in return for payments and gifts. It is important to note that her case is not a rare one. Some of the lesser officials who had bribed her for a promotion also ‘sold’ governmental positions within their jurisdiction once they were promoted by virtue of bribery.

Table 1. Corruption by Power Category

Type of power	Number	Proportion
Financial and accounting	5	29.0%
Manager of state-owned companies	2	11.5%
Chief/deputy party-government head	8	48.0%
Head of government dealing with land and infrastructure building	2	11.5%

Source: http://slide.book.sina.com.cn/slide_14_651_28784.html#p=1 (accessed 16.05.2013).

Though unrepresentative statistically, this small bouquet of examples involving female corruption contain all the essential elements featuring corruption among party government officials in present-day China. We found no specific gender difference in corruption behavior when the conditions and convenience for corruption are present. In other words, whether an official is male or female makes no difference in corruption behavior, though power certainly does. One central ingredient of corruption is the trade of power for money, be it embezzlement, bribery or bribe-taking. All the recent major corruption cases in China have demonstrated the corruptive power of unconstrained power, no matter whether or not the power holder is a man or a woman. To the extent that corruption rests upon power and connection, the presence of women in major corruption cases implies that these women have risen to truly powerful positions and that they have got a firm foothold within the nexus of connection and ‘guanxi’ relations. The statistical dominance of male bureaucrats in corruption cases in China, thus, may not be taken as the testimony of higher male corruptibility than female; rather, it is an indication of (still) male dominance of power and powerful positions.

Female participation in corruption as mistresses

While gender is insignificant in corruption behavior, it is significant in explaining the emergence of a distinctive pattern of corruption in reform China, namely the threefold exchange between power, money and sex. Almost all the reported corruption cases involve these three elements. Dishonest officials collect money through trading their power. They in turn spend the money lavishly to satisfy their ego and feed their self-pride. Apart from material and recreational goods, (extramarital) sex has become a new sought-after commodity (Wang, 2005; Ding 2000; Liu 2003). With power, fame and money in their hands, dishonest officials plunge themselves into the newly risen sex market and find various ways to ‘consume’ female bodies (Li, 2012). Some visit brothels, use call girls or even collect prostitutes from the street. Some take advantage of the female employees in the vicinity. However, the majority practices *de facto* polygamy by taking up one or several young and beautiful women as their mistresses. In a way, young and beautiful women have become a new accessory and hence a status symbol for powerful men (Ding 2000; Liu 2003; Li, 2012). The Times of India cites a recent report by the Renmin University of China saying that “about 95 per cent of officials being investigated have mistresses”. According to the Guardian, the Deputy Chief of the Land Resource Bureau in Guangdong Province was accused by blog posts for receiving almost £2.8bn in bribes and for having affairs with 47 mistresses! (The Guardian, 2013). Taking into account of the general “sexual opening up” and “romantic revolution” that has swept China since the reform began (Farrer, 2006; Evans, 1997; Pan, 1993, 1995; Li 2003), mistress culture and promiscuous sexual behavior itself may not necessarily constitute a corruptive act. However, to the extent that corruption scandals and sexual scandals have become symbiotic, we need to look into the widespread mistress culture among Chinese officials in order to untangle the interplay between power, money and sex as well as the role of gender and gender relations in corruptions. The first question concerns the “economic capital” of male officials and their endeavor to enhance their economic capital. In the “liberated” sex market (also pairing practice) in reform China, economic status becomes the greatest leverage for a male than anything else and this has differentiated their access and affordability to sexual pleasures outside of home. While middle-aged business men from Hong Kong and Taiwan discovered their great

“purchasing” power on the sexual market in Mainland China and began to enjoy life with the mistresses they contracted for long or short terms (Yue, 2004), white foreigners have also an advantage in attracting young Chinese young and in engaging in interracial sexual adventures (with or without marriage as the result) owing to their “cultural and economic capital – the standards of consumption they could afford and the worlds of consumer pleasure they could introduce to China’s incipient nightlife scenes” (Farrer, 2010: 80). What government officials have is basically political power, the so-called “political capital”. However, by trading their power for money, government officials can convert their political capital into tangible economic capital and hence become a competitive buyer of sexual pleasure on the sex market.

Mistress culture among government officials thus does not only stand for moral erosion, free love or decadent life style; it is also an undoubted indicator of corruption due to the inseparableness of money and sex in these kinds of relations. For without money, besides a salary, floating into their pockets, governmental officials would hardly be able to provide luxurious houses, apartments and other high-class consumption goods for their mistresses and hence would be unable to keep them. The link between corruption and mistresses, however, can be related to the problem of which came first, the chicken or the egg. In some cases, it is the desire to possess young beauties that drives dishonest officials into cash-hunting so as to enhance their affordability. In other cases, dishonest officials install a mistress or several mistresses outside home as a way to consume the money they have illegitimately collected. Sometimes, it can be both. Besides, government officials, as the recent case against Yi Junqing has indicated, also demand and take bribes in forms of both sexual intercourse and money from young women in exchange for the favor or protection they can provide with the power invested in their hands.

In leaning against a powerful or rich man and becoming his mistress, young women today played a role in the ecological chain of corruption, with or without being directly involved in the corruption enterprise of their male patronage. A glimpse into the latest major corruption cases portrays a threefold picture of mistress as their role in corruption is concerned. Firstly, some of these women trade intimacy or sex for money and material goods. They enter into a kind of “sexual contract” with government officials and by virtue of this sexual relationship they are able to retrieve large amounts of cash as well as other material goods ranging

from houses, cars, jewelries to memberships at luxury clubs and holiday resorts. They may be typically characterized as “gold-diggers”, and their role in the ecological chain of corruption is mainly to absorb and consume the money dishonest officials have embezzled or collected illegally. Secondly, some mistresses are far more ambitious. By entering into a “sexual contract” with government officials, they are seeking not only material goods but also favor and protection in order to advance their own interests and expand their influences. They may be characterized as “power-utilizes” (on top of “gold-diggers”), and their role in the ecological chain of corruption is to absorb and consume the money dishonest officials have embezzled or collected illegally and to solicit preferential treatment, often circumventing laws and normative administrative procedures. Some of these women have relations with a number of government officials. They have knitted a huge ‘guanxi’ net around themselves and are often the pivot of reciprocity and power-favor exchange in this ‘guanxi’ net. Lastly, some mistress become partners of corrupt officials and play a direct role in corruption. They either render moral support or practical assistance to illegal money-hunting activity of their male lovers or collaborate with their patronage in taking bribes and misusing public funds.

The participation of in corruption as wives, mothers and daughters (or other family members)

Corruption in present-day China is not merely an isolated individual act. Chinese officials “are committed to their family and other members of their social networks” (Kwong, 1997: 88). In order to look after their loved ones, dishonest officials “used their influence and broke administrative rules and even laws” (*ibid.*). Very often, corruption activities were conducted jointly by male officials, as the main actor, and their spouses. Husband-wife solidarity and cooperation characterizes almost all the major corruption cases being disclosed recently. The embroilment of wives in corruption is manifested by a public saying, which states that “behind every corrupt male official there stands a corrupt wife”. Typically, the wives of government officials get involved in the following ways. Firstly, they help others, say lesser officials and entrepreneurs, to access their powerful husbands and then demand money in return for the help they have provided. Secondly, they encourage their husbands to take bribes in order to increase the welfare of their family or children. Thirdly, they

store and manage the money their husbands have illegitimately collected. Fourthly, they exploit the employees of their husbands by squeezing money and expensive gifts out of them. Very often, a couple works closely as a team. The husband stages himself as a “clean” and “honest” public servant, whereas the wife receives money and gifts behind the curtains. In some cases, dishonest officials need the assistance of their wives for tactical reasons. For it would be more convenient and safer to let wives take bribes than to do it by themselves.

Over the last five years, a number of wives were convicted for corruption together with their husbands. A sensational example is Zhang Yafei, wife of Ma Xiangdong, former Executive Deputy Mayor of Shenyang who was executed in 2001 for corruption crimes.¹ From 1998, the year he became Executive Deputy Mayor of Shenyang, to the day he was charged for corruption, Ma received bribes of up to 30,000,000 Yuan. About 68% of the bribe money was accumulated with the help of Zhang Yafei. In the beginning Zhang merely administered the money for her husband. Later on, she began to fish for money by herself. As the wife of a powerful man, Zhang used to receive a considerable amount of visitors at home. Her motto was “don’t bother to come without bringing something to me”. After Ma was jailed in a secret place, Zhang bribed a number of officials and judicial workers for information about her husband. Altogether eight people were put into prison for having taken bribes from Zhang. In the end, Zhang herself was arrested and put into prison. Another convicted wife is Han Guirong, wife of Wang Huaizhong, former Vice Governor of Anhui Province. She received ten years in prison for her implication in corruption.

Recent Chinese blogs “accused a twenty something daughter of a former housing official in Zhengzhou, capital of central Henan Province, of owning 11 flats”. Furthermore, her “27-year-old brother may own as many as 14” flats. The “family is under investigation” (Kaiman, 2013). Since 2007, a new term “luo guan 裸官” (naked official) has come into popular usage in China to refer to those government officials who have sent their family abroad for permanent residence in a foreign country. Very often, these officials were those who have collected a huge fortune through various forms of corruption, and by sending their family abroad they also

¹ Ma was executed in Jiangsu Province on 10th October, 2001. He is the first person in China who was executed by giving an injection. For more about Ma, see news.tom.com/Archive/1002/2003/1/8-36878.html.

transferred the fortune to a safer place beyond the reach of China. According to Chinese Internet sources, “naked officials” tend to be greedier and more vicious in money hunting as they have nothing to worry about or even lose. A large number of them have fled China to join their family abroad just before they were caught for corruption. Family and family members of corrupt officials, to this extent, have benefited enormously from the corruption economy and have become newly rich thanks to a bed of corruption. Professor Zu Lijia from the National Administration College estimates that China, as of 2013, has about 1.18 million “naked officials”, who range from leaders in government administrative institutions, local government officials to leaders of many state-owned enterprises.

Conclusions

In this paper we looked into the participation and involvement of women in corruption scandals, as government officials, as wives, daughters and mistresses of corrupt male officials, and we discussed the relevance of gender in corruption in the Chinese context. Our study aims to fill the gap between fanfare media exposure and the description of women in or behind corruption and the absence of gender and its relevance in academic research regarding corruption in China so far. Due to the lack of a systematic and gender divided corruption statistics from China, we do not pursue a statistic tendency of corruption among men and women, nor a comparison between them. The general feeling is that far more male officials than female officials were caught for corruption, though this might have to do with male dominance in political power and government positions. While the question of which sex (in China) is “cleaner and fairer” than the other has to be put aside and await for further evidence and investigation, this study observed no distinct gender-based difference in corruption behavior. The major corruption cases involving a female official share the same characteristics of corruption cases committed by male officials. It seems that when corruption has become deeply rooted and widespread as it is in reform China and when power-money exchange has become a “normative” rule of game, government officials grab the chance to get rich regardless of gender. The relatively small number of women involved in corruption may not necessarily imply that women are cleaner than men but rather indicate the minority status of women in politics.

On the other hand, however, corruption is indeed a gendered problem in Chinese society given the reconfiguration of gender relations on a market premise and the extremely uneven distribution of political and economic resources along the gender line. Male officials not only dominate the political and government positions, but also make a huge fortune by engaging in corruption activities. The concentration of mighty political and economic resources in the hands of the male power holder constitutes a sharp contrast to the general disadvantageous position of women on the labor market. Additionally, the participation of women in corruption as family members and mistresses of male officials might be seen as an active choice of these individuals to have a share in the growing national wealth. By aligning themselves with powerful and rich (often corrupt) male officials, women not only contract great economic benefit but also help to sustain the ecological chain of corruption by consuming the money corrupt officials have collected. Mistress culture as contracted sexual relations are rooted deep in Chinese history, whereas the modern version of mistress culture is rested upon the political capital and economic “buying power” of male officials and the utilization of their “sexual capital” (or erotic capital) by young women for material goods and personal favors. However, by saying corruption is a gendered problem we do not mean the fixed gender role with powerful and rich male government officials on the one hand and young, beautiful and money-thirsty women on the other. There are some cases from China showing young, handsome males who offer sexual pleasure to powerful female officials. The exchange between sex and money perseveres and characterizes all corruption cases, however, the place of gender can be switched and become the other way around.

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