The politics of conceptualizing corruption in reform China

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Abstract. It is significant to examine Chinese debates over corruption for several reasons. These debates confirm certain universal aspects of corruption that have been emphasized in the Western social science literature. They also suggest unique features of corruption that are useful for understanding the issue in the Chinese context. They further reveal how the conceptualization of corruption is politicized in the Chinese discourse, giving insight to the alignment of political and intellectual forces on the issue. Finally, Chinese analyses have heuristic values for general discussions of political corruption. This paper surveys Chinese debates over the definitions, sources, and consequences of corruption from the late 1980s to the late 1990s.

Introduction

Rampant corruption is a well-known post-communist phenomenon. But more than its extraordinary scope, its unprecedented and ever changing characteristics make corruption an unresolved and contested issue at the conceptual as well as political level. Not surprisingly, popular, policy, and scholarly debates over corruption have been copious and diverse throughout China’s reform period. Many popular magazines and more serious journals have a section devoted to the corruption issue, not just on scandal reports and cases analyses, but also policy and theoretical debates and developments. The wide range of literature is published both by prosecutorial agencies, party disciplinary committees, and party organizations at national, provincial, municipal and still levels, and by academic and commercial presses. Between the two broad strands of official and unofficial publications one clearly detests distinct differences among the Chinese in understanding and approaching key issues of corruption. As a more healthy sign, even among the more official sources one frequently reads about debates among prosecutors and disciplinary personnel themselves as to how best to identify and deal with corrupt behavior in the reform context. Their responses, in turn, depend much oh how they conceive of what constitutes corrupt behavior, what contributes to particular behaviors, and the degree of harm to society. Such conceptual matters over the definitions, causes, and consequences have serious implications in the Chinese public discourse for policy assessments and coping strategies. For a matter
proper identification and approach can affect leadership perceptions of the nature and severity of corruption and the type of anti-corruption efforts. They can affect how potential offenders distinguish between right and wrong in uncertain situations. And they can affect whether the public can make rational assessment of perceived wrong doings. Finally, in anti-corruption efforts, a matter of conceptual differences can determine the targets of crackdown and the fate of individual offenders.

It is relevant to examine the Chinese debates over the definitions, causes, and consequences of corruption for several reasons. First, Chinese discussions confirm certain universal aspects of corruption that have been emphasized in the Western social science literature. Second, Chinese conceptions suggest unique features of corruption that are useful for understanding the issue in the post-communist reform context. Third, Chinese analyses reveal how the conceptualization of corruption is politicized, giving insight to the alignment of political and intellectual forces on the issue. Fourth, Chinese debates shed light on policy conflicts, law-making politics and leadership approaches to dealing with corruption. Finally, Chinese analyses have heuristic values for general discussions of political corruption. This paper surveys Chinese debates over the definitions, sources, and consequences of corruption that have appeared in popular and academic periodicals from the late 1980’s to the late 1990’s.

What is corruption: Narrow or broad definitions?

In the English language literature, the various conceptions may be broadly grouped into two frameworks. The behavior-classifying framework includes those conceptions that are “public-office-centered” or “public-interest-centered,” both of which generally define corruption as the abuse of public roles/resources by office-holders for private benefit. The principal-agent-client framework, on the other hand, focuses on interactions among the three actors and defines corruption in terms of the divergence of interest between the principal and the agent. Both approaches, as Michael Johnson notes, can suffer from problems of identifying clear roles and rules, while leaving little room for the richness and subtlety of cultural and social settings. In societies under transition, moreover, corruption is a politically contested or unresolved concept, further complicating the matter. Indeed, while Chinese conceptions of corruption share the emphasis of prevailing Western scholarship on deviation from public roles and rules, they also highlight the peculiar circumstances of culture and systemic transition that create ample ambiguities in conceiving corruption.

Generally, liberal minded legal professionals and intellectuals favor a narrow definition, limiting it to the core element of the abuse of public office.