

Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign: The Politics of Revenge

Steven P. Feldman. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. 196 pp. £120.00; \$160.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781032362694

Andrew Wedeman

Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA
Email: awedeman@gsu.edu

In *Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign*, Steven Feldman offers an interpretive analysis of the massive anticorruption campaign launched by Xi Jinping almost immediately after he was selected as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The campaign expanded the focus of a series of earlier anti-corruption crackdowns and saw a dramatic increase in the number of senior officials – or what the Chinese press labels “tigers” – officials and Party cadres holding bureaucratic ranks at or above the vice-ministerial/vice-gubernatorial levels. Since the beginning of the crackdown, scholars and other observers have debated whether the driving force behind it was corruption per se or whether the crackdown was actually a weapon wielded by Xi in an effort to consolidate his grip on power by systematically purging his political rivals.

Drawing on the work of 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Feldman argues that the crackdown is a “status reversal ritual.” According to Feldman, the Party’s “totalitarian” rule has disempowered society and left ordinary Chinese feeling helpless, angry and frustrated. The power and oppressiveness of the regime, however, forces the masses to swallow their bitterness and suffer in silence. The result is “resentment” – a desire for vengeance and the violent humiliation of individual members of a corrupt and oppressive elite.

According to Feldman, Xi has used the masses’ desire to see their oppressors dragged down and punished as a way of simultaneously bolstering his personal legitimacy and popularity while also taking out his political enemies and rivals. In Feldman’s view, Xi has embraced the role of a modern day “good emperor” waging war against today’s evil magistrates and gentry, thereby assuaging the masses’ thirst for revenge.

Xi’s goal is not, however, to purify society and restore justice. On the contrary, Feldman argues that Xi’s true goal is to strengthen the Party’s totalitarian grip on power and perpetuate oppression. Thus, while Xi’s “slays” the “vicious old tigers” (corrupt officials loyal to former party leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao) who have preyed on society, he has replaced them with new “Xi tigers” who are just as unlikely to eschew corruption and repression. The anticorruption campaign thus plays to the resentment emotions of the masses but denies society true release from the source of their resentment – totalitarianism.

As an interpretive analysis, Feldman offers a new and innovative alternative to conventional analyses of Xi’s motives in launching what has now become a decade-long drive. Feldman’s analysis, however, has limits. First, his description of Chinese society as a seething mass of angry citizens burning with a lust for violent vengeance against a corrupt totalitarian political elite is at odds with public opinion polling data gathered both before and after the advent of the anti-corruption crackdown. Repeated polls conducted by Martin Whyte (*Myth of the Social Volcano* [2010, Stanford University Press]), Bruce Dickson (*The Dictator’s Dilemma* [Oxford University Press, 2016]) and Chen Jie (*A Middle Class Without Democracy* [Oxford University Press, 2013]) have consistently yielded evidence that although ordinary Chinese view corruption as a problem, they believe it is worse at the grassroots level than at higher levels of the party-state and that the regime writ large enjoy surprisingly high levels of diffuse support. This suggests that even before Xi launched the crackdown, China was not a smouldering “social volcano.”



Second, Feldman's analysis is based on fieldwork conducted during 2015–2016. Feldman's data is thus drawn from the early days of Xi's campaign. As noted above, the crackdown has proven an open-ended affair and has morphed into what Wang Qishan, who led the anti-corruption machinery during its first five years, called a "new normal." As a result, while the "tiger hunt" seemed to generate a great deal of sound and fury in its early years it has since become routinized even though the number of tigers "bagged" in each of the past few years has rivalled the number bagged in the past. As a result, one might now wonder whether Xi's efforts to play on deep resentment as a way of inflating his popularity may have ended up engendering new and deeper feelings of cynicism about the regime's pledge to fight corruption to the end. Put differently, has a decade of tiger hunting helped or harmed Xi's image as the good emperor and champion of purity and justice?

Third, Feldman's fieldwork was based largely on interviews of ex-patriots, academics and students. This means that most of his data is second-hand and largely anecdotal in nature. The data represents the impressions of those Feldman interviewed rather than first-hand insights of those orchestrating and conducting the crackdown – or its targets. As a result, Feldman ends up inferring Xi's motives by juxtaposing his informants' observations and his reading of Nietzsche's concept of resentment, rather than deriving it from hard data. Absent access to Xi and his inner thoughts, of course, inference is unavoidable and Feldman's use of Nietzsche as a means to understand Xi is a commendable scholarly exercise.

Finally, Feldman's reliance on field interviews yields a somewhat confusing account. As is often the case, different informants have different views and takes on Xi's motives and the crackdown. In his presentation of his interviews, Feldman tends to give full due to the differing observations of his many informants, with the result that the narrative often consists of a series of disparate claims, which Feldman then seeks to interpret and reconcile. Although Feldman does an admirable job in this regard, the result is a sometimes jumbled and seemingly contradictory series of anecdotes rather than a tightly focused and pointed analysis.

In sum, Feldman proposes an innovative and fresh interpretation of Xi's anticorruption campaign but one which might have been more compelling if it rested on a more robust empirical foundation.

doi:10.1017/S0305741024000420

The Rise and Fall of the EAST: How Exams, Autocracy, Stability, and Technology Brought China Success, and Why They Might Lead to Its Decline

Yasheng Huang. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023. 440 pp. \$35.00 (hbk). ISBN 9780300266368

Minxin Pei

Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA, USA
Email: mpei@cmc.edu

The durability of China's autocratic political system in history has long fascinated scholars. But few have offered a persuasive theory to explain its longevity. Yasheng Huang's *The Rise and Fall of the EAST* presents an original and provocative theory that has greatly advanced our understanding of the puzzle of enduring autocracy in imperial and contemporary China. Unlike previous scholarly attempts that focussed on political culture, Huang identifies a critical institution – *keju*, the