

China Observations

Corruption: Chinese People Look For Action, But Words Matter Too

Chris Marquis and Zoe Yang

Harvard Business School

Since Xi Jinping took office, he has made fighting corruption a centerpiece of his tenure, making a series of speeches on the issue, cracking down on small-time graft, and ultimately launching a “June Rectification” campaign that will continue into the next year. But given the fact that Xi’s predecessors largely only paid lip service to combating corruption, and the persisting severity of the problem, it may be understatement to say that people have complicated feelings about President Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. Further, in recent years, social media has played a significant role in exposing corruption like never before. Since 2012, there are many examples of netizens’ vigilante justice through highly publicized “human flesh searches” on corrupt officials. Each new case inspires ever more anger, breeding cynicism and undermining legitimate efforts to address the problem. Using Crimson Hexagon’s social media analysis platform, we set out to understand people’s feelings about the current state of corruption in China, and how they feel about the new government measures.

Understanding Chinese citizens’ perceptions of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is essential for a number of reasons. There are significant questions as to whether government corruption is so vast that it’s threatening to cripple China’s economic system and halt growth. And the extent to which people fear corruption serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy, limiting foreign investment and spurring the continued asset flight of Chinese elites. Thus, not only is it important to take concrete actions to limit corruption, it is also essential to build people’s confidence in the capability of CCP leaders to undertake such a task.

Eliminating the root causes of corruption will take a long time, yet perception can swing quickly. Thus, it’s important that any new campaign addressing the corruption issue cannot be the same old tactics packaged in the same old language: the government must be able to convince people that this time, it’s for real. In the analysis below, not only do we examine feelings about the new government measures, we also look at the importance of key events and what types of government messaging people respond to best.

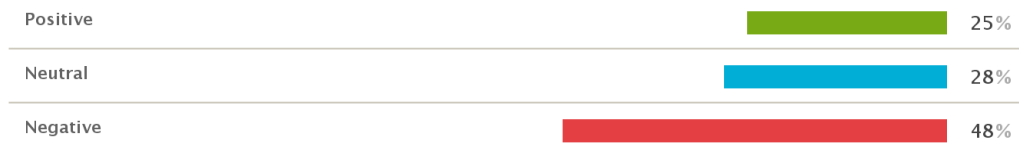
General sentiments on Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign

First, we wanted to understand very generally how people have felt about President

Xi's stance on corruption – positive, neutral, or negative. Analyzing sentiment on Weibo, we examined the period from 11/15/2012, when Xi took office, until the end of July, 2013. From this analysis, our first conclusion is that while netizens were initially dismissive of his hard-line attitude, as the speeches continued and messaging became more nuanced and evocative, they have become more supporting, if still skeptical.

Graph 1 below shows that the cumulative opinion of the anti-corruption campaign has been more negative than positive since Xi took office.

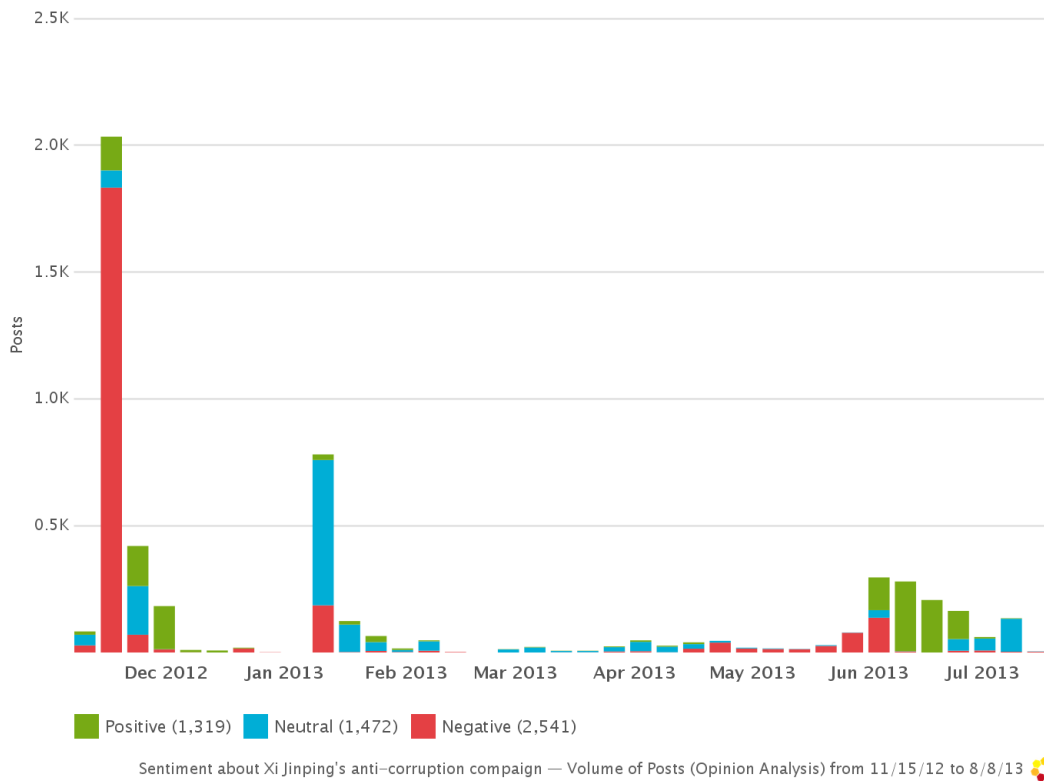
Graph 1: Cumulative Sentiment of Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign Since 11/15/2012



Sentiment about Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign — Opinion Analysis from 11/15/12 to 8/8/13

However, more important than examining the cumulative sentiment over the whole period is looking at how this sentiment is trending over time. Graph 2, which displays opinions week by week, shows that recently, opinion has shifted dramatically to become more favorable.

Graph 2: Week-by-Week Breakdown of Sentiment on Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign Since 11/15/2012



Importance of events and messaging in shaping perception

The second key lesson from the analysis is that key events coupled with effective messaging are important factors in changing perception.

Looking at the spike on November 25th of 2012, when sentiments were an astounding 97% negative, it turns out that on this day the CCP announced that it would launch a rectification campaign in the spring that would intensively crack down on corruption. In other words, this was the official beginning of Xi's campaign. Perhaps netizens, disappointed by the previous administration's lack of results and expecting their new leader to trot out the same empty promises, merely interpreted the announcement as an excuse for Xi to clean out political opponents.


*依然不看好。虽然说反比不反好，但建立在暗箱操作的基础上反腐容易被利用。
Not optimistic. Although saying they'll fight corruption is better than nothing, but operations conducted in a black box can easily be exploited.*

At this point, people tended to be skeptical about the methods and effectiveness of Xi's anti-corruption campaign. After previous failures, such campaigns are widely seen as the Party's excuses for weeding out unfavorable political factions. People want to know why this campaign will be different, so without transparent mechanisms and strong communication, all efforts will be in vain.

*问题日积月累，权钱交易贪腐成风，岂是一两次整风，一两次扫除可以解决？
Problems have continued over time, corruption is rife, how can one or two rectifications
or sweeps solve these problems?*

However, sentiment started to shift beginning with Xi's January 22nd speech on corruption at the Plenary Session of Central Committee for Discipline Inspection. Following the speech, the debate on Weibo swayed more neutral than negative – a clear improvement. After this speech, Chinese netizens were more likely to adopt a more “wait and see” approach as opposed to offering a positive or negative opinion about the speech. Many netizens also simply reshared news of the speech.



Sentiment about Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign — Opinion Analysis from 1/22/13 to 1/23/13 

During the speech, Xi emphasized his unprecedented tough stance and great determination against corruption, introducing new aphorisms such as “contain power in a cage” (把权力关进笼子里) and “beat the fly and the tiger,” (老虎苍蝇一起打) which were highly reblogged on Weibo. It seems that not only were people becoming hopeful (or at least less skeptical) that real changes would happen under Xi's leadership, they responded to the catchy, quotable phrases. These phrases were also widely quoted in the foreign media, drawing even more attention to the campaign.

*且听其言观其行
Listen to his words and deeds*

*但愿不只是口号！
Hopefully not just a slogan!*

Finally, when we examined the positive wave of sentiment in June and July, we found that this shift in sentiment stemmed from a state media report on June 18th about the conference on the Party's “Mass Line Education and Practice Movement,” the official name of Xi's rectification campaign. The conference, capped off by another important speech from Xi, marked the campaign's launch. Many netizens reposted the report to show their support.



Sentiment about Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign — Opinion Analysis from 6/18/13 to 8/8/13 🌸

坚决彻底地拥护和支持以习总书记为首的党中央严惩贪污腐败[围观][赞][给力][微风]
 //@ 春来寒归: 没有共产党就没有新中国! 没有共产党绝不会有强大的中国! 相信习主席
 会回归毛泽东思想!

*Resolutely and thoroughly endorse and support the strict punishment for corruption by the Party
 Central Committee headed by General Secretary Xi! [Onlookers] [praise] [to force] [breeze] /
 / @ cold spring return: there would be no new China without the Communist Party! Without the
 Communist Party there will never be a strong China! I believe President Xi will return to Mao
 Zedong Thought!*

清除污浊! 割掉毒瘤! 瘦身强状! 正本清源!

Clear out filth! Cut off cancer! Strengthen and streamline! Get to the root of the problem!

Positive sentiment here was clearly provoked by concrete action: the campaign first promised in November 2012 was really happening. By choosing to frame his anti-corruption measures within a rectification campaign, however, Xi took a slight gamble. Rectification has rich historical connotations, and after capturing people's opinions on 整风, we found that on the one hand, many netizens associated rectification with Mao's Yan'an Rectification and approved of Xi's campaign. On the other hand, there were also many netizens who remembered rectification as a disingenuous way for CCP leaders to get rid of their enemies.

Graph 3: Sentiments about Xi Jinping's Rectification Campaign



June Rectification — Opinion Analysis from 6/18/13 to 8/2/13 🌸

Many foreign media outlets have recently noted the Maoist elements of Xi's campaign with alarm, yet among Chinese people, alignment with Mao has certainly helped Xi's image. Mao can mean many things, but President Xi's speech, with its hardline stance, folksy tone, and populist language, evoked an idealized early Mao – the Mao who kept tight control on corruption. Many rectification campaigns have come, failed, and gone since Yan'an, but Yan'an is the one people recall proudly. By channeling the

Chairman, Xi is sending the message that he is both a powerful leader and serious about restoring the Party to its purer roots.

Even though the speech was a big success, doubts are far from banished. President Xi asked the central inspectors to be tough and fulfill their supervising duty, but some people remain skeptical as to whether this kind of intra-party supervision would work.

靠人治都是治标不治本//@王英杰 kingwang: 没有独立于政党的权力监管机构, 反腐就是扯淡, 目测习大大在位期间也不太可能办成这事儿。//@高原狼迹: 没有监督的权力必然會濫用, 這幾乎與個人修養無關。

Relying on individuals to be upright is only a stopgap measure // @ Wang Yingjie kingwang: if there are no independent regulatory bodies, fighting corruption is a joke, visual learning is unlikely to get the job done. // @ Highland wolf tracks: Without supervision, it's bound to result in abuse of power, which has almost nothing to do with personal ethics.

The volume and tone of corruption related posts show that Chinese people remain deeply concerned about corruption. After two key speeches over the past nine months and the launch of the rectification campaign, they are beginning to believe that he isn't just paying lip service to the problem. They pin great hope on this new leader, but can't help being skeptical at the same time. Tough words may get the people's attention, but Xi still has to prove his words aren't just "thunder with no rain." (打雷不见雨).

To sustain confidence and economic growth, perception is highly important. Yet if current leaders do not make real efforts at reform, they themselves risk being judged by history. The conclusion of our analysis of Weibo sentiment about Xi's anti-corruption campaign, is that so far, strong and evocative speeches coupled with some preliminary concrete action, have been able to make people more hopeful that President Xi means what he says about rooting out corruption. But the new leader will have to step carefully: not only is bad behavior harder to hide under Weibo's watchful eye, people are fed up with half measures, and in the upcoming months and years, they'll be looking for lasting results.