

*The Rise and Fall of Ruling Oligarchs: Fighting “Political Corruption” in China**

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Abstract

A new term, “political corruption,” emerged in the Chinese Communist Party discourse during President Xi Jinping’s corruption crackdown. To understand why this type of corruption is particularly unacceptable to the Party, I apply Winters’s theory of oligarchy to encapsulate a group of Chinese high-level political elites who leveraged their political power for massive material wealth through corrupt measures. I argue that these oligarchs had to defend both wealth and political power in the context of the single-party authoritarian regime. Their intent and capacity for the double defense, however, can pose a threat to the regime and pave the way to their downfall. Two high-profile cases further show how different career tracks provide power resources politicians can use to ascend to the level of oligarchs. This research draws attention to concept adaptation in corruption crackdowns in China and enriches oligarchical theory by signifying the logic of double defense for using political power as the steppingstone to oligarchic power.

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