

THE CAPITAL OF PUBLIC AGENDA-SETTING: CASE STUDY OF XI JINPING'S ANTI-GRAFT CAMPAIGN

Hagan Sibiri

Ph.D. Candidate in International Politics at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

ABSTRACT

The article examines (within the context of agenda-setting functions of the media) the influence of the Chinese mass media in public perception of corruption. It not only charts on the overall trend of Corruption Perception since Xi Jinping launched his far-reaching anti-graft drive but also demonstrates how the media is being required and used as a propaganda tool in the anti-graft campaign. The article largely draws upon existing survey data on corruption perception and news reports from 2012 to 2017. The analysis shows a plummet in public perception of corruption from the onset of Xi's anti-graft crackdown. However, a series of CPC and state-backed anti-graft mass media propaganda have had some positive influence on public perception of corruption. Therefore, by inference, the best attributable explanatory factor of China's recent improved Corruption Perception performance is the mass media anti-graft propaganda.

Keywords: *China, Mass media, Public agenda-setting, Public perception, Anti-graft, Xi Jinping.*

1. Introduction

The ability of the mass media to set the public agenda (public opinion) on key issues is an “immense and well-documented influence” (McCombs 2004). The public does not only access and consume information from the mass media, but also determines the priority and the emphasis to accord to the information provided by the media (McCombs 2004; McCombs and Shaw 1972). The seminal work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) that investigated the idea that the news media influence our perceptions is often credited as a pioneer empirical study of the agenda-setting function of the media. Lippmann's (1922) book, “*Public opinion*” was however the first to demonstrate how the media shape public opinion about the world by presenting a picture of world events. The picture painted by the media according to Lippmann might not be the reality, but the distorted picture presented by the media provides the basis for public perception.

A number of factors both within and without media organizations play an important role in setting the media agenda by influencing the news content (Riaz 2008). In China, for instance, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been very influential in setting the agenda for the media. The Chinese media are thus seen as holding a great stake in preserving and consolidating the legitimacy of CPC's rule. This shows that the media have an indirect, yet powerful and pervasive, effect on public opinion by limiting and prioritizing public perceptions of important issues. Yet, while the CPC has been successful at stifling independent reporting and directing and dictating the agenda for the mass media, a critical question is how does the CPC shape public perception on salient political issues such as corruption greatly detested by the public? Examining the agenda-setting function of the mass media, the objective is to explore whether the apparently unified mass media campaign (propaganda) and reportage of Xi Jinping's anti-graft campaign have had some influence on people's perception on corruption in China? The working hypothesis is that media report on the pervasiveness of corruption is likely to entrench people's negative perception of corruption. However, anti-graft propaganda drive in the mass media can have a positive effect on public perception about its pervasiveness.

2. Theoretical Context and Concept Definition

Agenda-Setting Function of the Media and Public Agenda-Setting

Setting the agenda is now a common phrase in the discussion of politics and public opinion. This phrase summarizes the continue dialogue and debate in every community over what should be at the center of public attention and action (McCombs 2004). It demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship between media agenda and public agenda (opinion). The influence on the media, including what gets into the news agenda of the media and what do not, and how it is presented for public consumption is therefore much of a concern for media agenda setting scholars. Such influence may be considered coming from within the news organization or without. Understanding the source of news, therefore, determines whose agenda is being promoted and how the new is framed (Riaz 2008). This ability of the mass media to influence the salience of issues in the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting function of the news media. It simply describes the powerful ability and influence of the media to tell what issues are important for public consumption. According to Lippmann (1922), the media dominates over the creation of pictures in our mind. The public,

therefore, reacts not to actual events but to the pictures in our head. In its classical definition, the concept of agenda-setting studies how the salience of ‘objects’ in the news is transferred from the media to the public (McCombs and Reynolds2002).

In choosing and displaying news, the mass media play an important part in shaping political reality. Some thesis, however, argues that the mass media do not always reflect reality, but rather filter and shape reality. To Lippmann, ‘the news and truth is not the same thing and must be clearly distinguished’ (Lipmann 1922). The media concentration on a few issues and subjects may lead the public to perceive those issues as the reality and more important than other issues. The agenda-setting function of the mass media, thus, links the concept of journalism to the process of public opinion, a link with considerable consequences for society as it summarizes the continue dialogue and debate in societies over what should be at the center of public attention (McCombs 2004).

Public agenda in the context of this article refers to public opinion on salient issues (political, economic or social). Public agenda consists of issues that are perceived by the political community as meriting public attention and governmental action. The agenda of the mass media in effect becomes the agenda of the public. In other words, the news media sets the public agenda by influencing public perception. Placing an issue on the public agenda so that it “becomes the focus of public attention and thought - and, possibly, action - is the initial stage in the formulation of public opinion” (McCombs2004). The mass media has, therefore, become a key tool used in structuring communication surrounding critical issues.

The CPC, the Mass Media and Public Agenda-Setting in China

Despite a quarter-century of economic and social liberalization, and the apparent erosion of centralized control of market forces, the CPC still plays a formidable role in the Chinese media landscape. The CPC in its first congress resolution in 1921 explicitly declared that “no central or local publications should carry any article that opposes the Party’s principles, policies, and decisions” (Zhao 1998). The media have since received key attention from the top leadership in China with almost all previous CPC top leaders “actively involved in media and propaganda activities at some point in their careers” (Volland 2003). Mao Zedong in 1959 emphasized the importance of the media in China’s political landscape with his assertion that “newspapers must be run by politicians” (ibid.). During the height of media liberation in the 1990s, there was also a general consensus within the CPC that the mass

media as a matter of principle must “first of all promote political stability and persuade the people...” (Lam1991).The mass media, thus play a critical role in framing an issue in China and are seen as the catalyst for the CPC’s propaganda agenda.

Ever since the Agenda-Setting concept was introduced to China in the early 1980s, it has been received with a great deal of enthusiasm, mainly because the concept fits the CPC’s view of the role of the media and its emphasis on the media’s influence in guiding public opinion (He 2009). The CPC has been able to maintain itscommunitistic policies toward the media, but modern capitalistic policies toward the rest of its industry (Wetherbee2010).Thus, although the Chinese media landscape has experience magnificent transformation beginning in the late 1970s (Zhao 2004) with the CPC relinquished its mass media monopoly “over the information reaching the public” (Shirk, 2011), the media as of today is still tightly controlled and governed by the Party’s principles, serving as a mass mobilization tool for guiding public opinion (Dai 1999).According to Stockmann and Gallagher (2011), the absence of conflicting information in China due to the sophisticated censorship system allows the state to achieve its desired political goal. Thus, the media in China provides a more persuasive message that “continue to accord with state censorship demands while satisfying readers’ interest in real-life stories and problems”.¹

In effect, the media in China’s communication and political systems, are used as instruments through which CPC can propagate its policies and ideologies (Luo 2013; Pan2000; Kluver et al.2003). With the media still regarded by the CPC as its mouthpiece to shape the “values and perspective of the entire population” (Lieberthal 2004), the Chinese media are therefore seen as not fulfilling its functions as a watchdog of the state but rather it is the state that acts as a watchdog of the media (He 2008).This watchdog role of the CPC over the mass media is deemed as crucial for the party to help keep an oversight and checks over local officials as well as for the purpose of maintaining stability (Lorentzen 2013).In so doing, the Chinese media for decades have served effectively in a public agenda setting by undertaking propaganda for CPC (Kluver et al.2003).The ability and effectiveness of the Chinese media

¹ For an extensive study of Chinese media censorship, refer to King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, 2014); Wetherbee (2010); He (2008); IFJ (2015).

to set public agenda have however been questioned. A study in 2001 by a group of scholars from Fudan University testing the media's agenda-setting function found that the media in China do not function well enough in setting the public agenda because the Chinese media do not only lack credibility among the public but also their operation is not in "accordance with the law of communication" (Zhang 2006). Contrary, a study by Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) in four Chinese cities on labor-related issues, reveals that media publicity positively impacted on citizens' image.

The Rise of the New Media

The advent and rise of the internet have given Chinese citizens greater freedom of expression from the onset of this 21st century (Yan 2015), by reshaping information consumption and the way the public express their opinions (Ahmed and Jia 2014). The rapid development of the internet in China has therefore raised questions about the impact of the traditional media on public agenda-setting. The internet as a matter of fact has given Chinese journalist and netizens a platform to voice their concern and to publish news deemed unworthy by the traditional mass media (Yan 2015; Beach 2013), as well as given Chinese netizens the ability to access news stories uncovering state corruption (Cho 2010). The internet has in principle transformed the conventional mode of public agenda-setting in China and in effect has transformed "the reality of Chinese citizens" and the "whole atmosphere of public opinion in China" (Ahmed and Jia 2014).

Although very few studies have systematically examined the influence of the internet on the agenda-setting process in China, the rise of the internet has undoubtedly reduced public reliance on conventional media for information and therefore may diminish the CPC's abilities to influence public perception through the conventional media.² As noted by Reporters Without Borders, although the internet is highly subjected to censorship, it offers a direct means of communication for citizens to express their views. The emergence of the internet has, therefore, resulted in the government losing total control over the media.³ Nonetheless, the internet has done little to increase freedom of the media in China. In 2014,

² For an empirical analysis of the internet and Agenda Setting in China see Luo, Y. (2012).

³ Reporters Without Borders (2007). China: Journey to the Heart of Internet Censorship. An investigative report by Reporters Without Borders and Chinese Human Rights Defenders.

China ranked 175 out of 180 countries in the world in terms of media freedom (Reporters Without Borders 2014).

Guiding Public Opinion through the Mass Media

Although media organizations do not just passively broadcast information repeating the words of the official sources or conveying exactly the incidents of an event; and also, do not select or reject the day's news in proportion to reality (Riaz2008), the case in China is different. Chinese authorities essentially determine what the public should focus on by using the media to set the agenda for the public (Luo2014). Using a formal model to examine China's strategic censorship, Lorentzen (2013) finds that the regime benefits from such "sophisticated media control strategy" by allowing for aggressive media report "on low-level malfeasance in order to improve governance, but constantly adjusting the amount of reporting in order to avoid giving discontented citizens enough information...". The mass media in China, thus possess a "tremendous influence on public opinion and Chinese politics" (International Media Support 2008).

Beginning in 2014, all journalists in China were required to take the National Press accreditation examination. The training materials demanded journalists take on the role of guiding public opinion by acting as mouthpieces for the party and the government (IFJ2015). The mass media acting as the mouthpiece of the party is not new in the Chinese political landscape. Since the founding of communist China, the state has defined the "role of its press primarily as a propaganda mouthpiece of the party leadership" (Cho 2010). Recently, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) extended its reach into media organizations' offices.⁴ On June 9, 2014, Xinhua reported how the CCDI reminded the party group within Xinhua to insist on upholding "correct guidance of public opinion" while commending some of the media organizations (notably, People's Daily and the Qiushi magazine) for their "efforts in marshaling public debate and opinion".⁵ This resonates

⁴ The CCDI was the central party internal organ responsible for enforcing party discipline and investigating corrupt practices. A constitutional amendment in 2018 however combined the CCDI and other government anti-corruption agencies to form a new state organ, the National Supervisory Commission (NSC) as the highest anti-graft body.

⁵ Wall Street Journal, "China's Antigraft Drive Hits Communist Party Media", May 15, 2016: <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/10/19/chinas-antigraft-drive-hits-communist-party-media/>

the 1990s where, despite the reform of Mao's era hardline approach of the media, the propaganda department of the CPC still admonished journalists to produce news items that would "score through gentle persuasion" (Lam1991). This is notwithstanding the foremost role of the media of "making of positive propaganda" on behalf of the party.⁶

To further reaffirm the CPC control over the media, President Xi Jinping personally visited the various Chinese media organizations on February 19, 2016, and ordered the news media to focus on positive reporting and strictly speak for the party's will and its propositions.⁷ A 2013 commentary by the Chinese Global Times perhaps sums-up everything about the importance of the Chinese media as a tool used by the party for shaping public opinion. The commentary explained how the western media have been trying to make breakthroughs from topics that the Chinese public is most concerned about. "They would create quite a stir or directly set China's political agenda. If successful, they will be at the center of China's public opinion sphere...but they [the western media] will be challenged by our [China's] wisdom and determination".⁸

3. Data and Method

By exploring the public agenda-setting function of the media, the article examines media coverage and propaganda of Xi's anti-graft campaign in relation to changes in public perception of corruption. Media influence on public perception of corruption in China is difficult to determine due to the generally low access to direct information concerning the public in China. The article, therefore, performs analysis based on existing global and local survey data on citizens' perception of corruption in China. The Transparency International Corruption Perception survey data between 2012 to 2017 is used to examine the trend of corruption perception since Xi Jinping assumes the top leadership and launched his far-reaching anti-graft campaign.⁹ Other survey data, such as the Pew Research Center survey of

⁶ Li Ruihuan (CPC Propaganda Chief in the 1990s) reaffirming the role of the media to journalists in January 1991. Cited in Lam (1991:20.5).

⁷ Xinhua News Agency, "China's Xi underscore CPC's leadership in news reporting", February 19, 2016: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/19/c_135114305.htm

⁸ Global Times, "China Can't Cede Agenda Setting to Western Media", December 17, 2013, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/832527.shtml>

⁹ Transparency International (TI) is a Berlin Based international organization that publishes global annual "Corruption Perceptions Index". TI grades countries on their levels of perceived corruption based on public opinion survey and expert assessments.

changes in corruption perception, as well as a local survey on Xi's anti-graft campaign, are utilized. Furthermore, content analysis of random media reports on party and state officials implicated for corruption was done to analyze the pattern of media reports on Xi's anti-graft campaign and to estimate the number of top CPC and state official implicated between 2012-2017.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Anti-Graft Campaign under Xi Jinping (2012-2017)

Anti-graft crusade has become a notable hallmark of Xi Jinping's leadership. Xi's ascension to power first as CPC General Secretary in 2012 and President in 2013 also ushered in a new agenda for the CPC - to fight corruption, a phenomenon that threatens the very existence of the party. Xi at his inaugural address vowed to root out corruption at both the highest (*tigers*) and lowest level (*flies*). Soon after, the CPC Central Politburo Committee published an '*eight-point guide*' on enforcing party discipline and tackling corruption which, among other things included the demand for a tougher penalty for corrupt officials. Official data indicate that a staggering 1.34 million officials (both high and lower level) have been incriminated with corruption and disciplinary violations between 2012-2017.¹⁰ In fact, the number of CPC Central Committee members (both full and alternate) exposed and punished in the last five years is estimated to be as many as the number disciplined between 1949-2012.¹¹ For instance, between 2013 to 2015, the anti-graft spearheaded by the CCDI had exposed about 150,000 CPC officials. Of this, 65,000 were punished. Between the same period, about 750,000 people were exposed and disciplined nationally involving about 36,000 criminal charges.¹² In 2017 alone, 159,100 were punished for corruption-related charges, according to the CCDI, with 61,000 officials punished between January to November for violating the '*eight-point guide*'.¹³

¹⁰ BBC, "Charting China's 'great purge' under Xi", October 23, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41670162>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Huang Shuxian, China's Minister of Supervision, Xinhua "China committed to 'clean governance': anti-graft official", May 13, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/13/c_135355345.htm

¹³ Xinhua, "China punishes 159,100 in anti-graft campaign in 2017", January 7, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/07/c_136878338.htm

Table 1:Top/ High-Level Officials Implicated by CCDI (2012-2017)*

	National/sub- NationalLeaders**	Provincial/Ministerial/Central Committee Members***	Sub-Provincial Level****	Total
2017	1	9	14	24
2016	0	4	31	35
2015	1	7	27	35
2014	4	7	30	41
2013	0	3	18	21
2012	0	1	1	2
Total	6	31	121	158

*Estimated number. Include only those implicated after the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Bo Xilai, for instance, was implicated before the anti-corruption campaign was launched after the 18th Party Congress that elected Xi Jinping. The list is not definite but just an estimate based on online search, media report and simple Wikipedia search (See Wikipedia, “*Officials implicated by the anti-corruption campaign in China (2012-2017)*”, Accessed June 20, 2018).

**National Leaders refer to leaders of the party and state (e.g. Member of the Politburo, leaders of CPPC, and the CMC). ‘Tigers’ implicated include Zhou Yongkang, General Xu Caihou, General GuoBoxiong, Ling Jihua, Su Rong, and Sun Zhengcai.

***Provincial-level party chiefs, governors, and Congress and Consultative Conference Chairs are of equal administrative rank as a minister of the state.

****Vice-ministers have the same rank as sub-provincial level officials.

The pattern of Media Reportage and the CPC-Backed Media Propaganda Crusade

The media is regarded as critical not only in controlling corruption by raising public awareness about corrupt practices and its consequences but also to investigate and reports on corruption incidences (Stapenhurst2000). The case of the Chinese media is an exception. Anti-corruption in China for the past five years has been a subject of significant

media attention under the leadership of Xi. Nonetheless, the Chinese media remain constrained in terms of independent reporting of state or party related corruption, but rather tend to report on sensitive cases such as corruption only after official permission or announcement has been made by the appropriate party and state department about the existence of an investigation (particularly when high-level officials are involved).

Thus, while it is competitive in the western media in terms of who first independently investigated and broke a story on issues such as state or government or individual corrupt deeds and malpractices, the media in China do not enjoy such luxury of reporting, but largely engage in passive reporting. For instance, a report by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2015 revealed how media reportage of corruption in China has been suppressed. A classic example is how all media reportage concerning Zhou Yongkang (a former Politburo Standing Committee member) was suppressed in both traditional and new media. Despite the wide reportage in the western media for days, official news agency Xinhua reported for the first time in a short statement on July 29, 2014, that Zhou was under investigation by the CCDI without giving any details. All relevant internet commentary by state media and micro-blogging (Weibo) were blocked and/or deleted (IFJ 2015).

A content analysis of random Chinese media reportage on corruption cases reveals a unified and consistent pattern of reports. The media, usually in a short statement report of an accused person being ‘under investigation for serious disciplinary violations’; ‘abuse of power’; or on ‘suspicion of accepting bribes and/or embezzlement’ without any details about how party discipline was violated or abuse. Instead, the media consistently highlight, praise, and report extensively on how the sweeping anti-graft campaign “felled bureaucrats and businessmen alike”;¹⁴ and how the CPC’s anti-corruption drive is striving best to root out corrupt individuals and practices.¹⁵ In a sign of unison in 2013, the major news media, including the

¹⁴ Wall Street Journal, “China’s Antigraft Drive Hits Communist Party Media”, May 15, 2016.

¹⁵ Xinhuanet, “CPC journal stresses continuing anti-graft campaign” Xinhua, February 16, 2016.
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/16/c_135103970.htm

commercial news portal websites (Sina and Sohu) had provided a direct link to state portals that report corruption (Shum and Zheng, 2014).

Another controversial involvement of the Chinese media is their role in public confession. Between 2013-2017, there had been a record of at least 45 “force television confession” on corrupt practices on national television.¹⁶In effect, the media has become a major tool for the CPC and the state in producing choreograph messages for public consumption. Participant does not only confess their crimes and corrupt practices but also praise the party and the state in their efforts and leadership, while at the same time rebuking Western interference. The state media go to the extent of accusing Western media reportage on corruption in China as well as attack international perception survey that does not favor China- of being bias.¹⁷ For instance, when China in 2014 plummeted from 80th position to 100th on the global Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the Chinese media (notably Global Times, Peoples Daily, and Xinhua) explicitly accuse international survey groups on corruption perception of being biased against China.

In a bid to shape the image of the CPC’s anti-graft efforts and to trumpet the success of Xi’s anti-graft drive to the public, the CCDI in collaboration with the China Central Television (CCTV) in October 2016 launched a media propaganda television mini series (8 episodes) titled “*Always on the Road*” centering on high profile corruption cases under Xi.¹⁸ The mini series was broadcast not only on CCTV but made available on the major websites and new media platform such as *Youku*. The propaganda mini series featured unique seventy-seven (77) corruption cases of the top prosecuted official.¹⁹ Also, in an attempt to

¹⁶ The Guardian, ‘My hair turned white’: report lifts lid on China’s forced confessions, April 12, 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/12/china-forced-confessions-report>

¹⁷ BBC, “China media: Global corruption survey accused of bias”, December 4, 2014.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30324244>

¹⁸ Xinhua, “Xinhua Insight: China’s anti-corruption campaign ‘always on the road’”, Xinhua, October 28, 2016.
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-10/28/c_135787848.htm

¹⁹ Top among them was a former Politburo standing member (Zhou Yongkang); former head of the United Front Work Department (Ling Jihua); former vice chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Su Rong); former president of state oil giant Sinopec (Wang Tianpu); and a series of former

promote anti-graft television shows, a general ‘ban’ on television shows or drama series centering on corruption imposed in 2004 was lifted by the state allowing for the screening of a blockbuster drama series in 2017 titled “*In the Name of the People*”. The anti-graft drama series receive a wider popular public review. Its success has led to the commissioning or approval of more anti-graft television shows and drama series by the state administration in charge of film and television.²⁰ These efforts not only serve to meet the demand and influence public opinion, but to show that the CPC care for people’s concerns among which is the issue of corruption no matter the rank and status of individuals involved.

The CPC and the state using the mass media as propaganda machinery in shaping the public agenda and opinion contemporary (i.e. post-Mao and Deng Xiaoping’s era) is not a new phenomenon. A major party and media campaign were initiated in 1990 to mark the 150th anniversary of the Opium War, basically as an attempt of diverting public attention from the one-year anniversary of the Tiananmen incidence (Lam 1991). Other notable aggressive CPC-backed media campaign was the effort to revive the values of Mao, and also the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing that saw a robust media campaign eulogizing the rule of the CPC and the might of the Chinese people (ibid.). The most recent significant cases are the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 70th anniversary of China’s victory over Japanese invasion in 2015. The anniversary, saw the banning of all entertaining television shows and dramas in favor of resistance propaganda so as to get the public in the mood for the upcoming celebration. The media were also ordered by the state to ensure a positive coverage of the military parade commemorating the anniversary. Guidance was issued to the media stating that news and comments related to the parade must be “positive”, while all websites should “actively promote positive, sunny netizen commentary”.²¹

provincial party secretaries such as Bai Enpei (Yunnan province), Zhou Benshun (Hebei province), Nie Chunyu (Shanxi province) Wan Qingliang (Guangdong province).

²⁰ CNBC, “China’s anti-graft campaign may be headed for a screen near you”, Cheang Ming, March 30, 2017. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/30/in-the-name-of-the-people-chinas-anti-graft-campaign-makes-it-to-the-small-screen.html>

²¹ BBC News, “China prepares for military parade with trained monkeys and blanket TV coverage”, September 1, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34115291>

Influence of the Media Anti-Graft Crusade on Public Perception

McCombs and Estrada extensively explained the news frames affect public perception and how political elites or media sources can choose to shape the presentation of an issue for the public.²² However, the discussion among agenda-setting scholars about the impact of the mass media to influence public perception desired by political authority is far from settled. Various scholars, therefore, extend the agenda-setting concept to how the “variations within coverage of an issue influence an issue’s salience in the public mind” (Jasperson et al. 1998). In general, public agenda encompasses the “general public’s perceptions of what is important and is typically reflected in polls [surveys] by organizations” (Andreasen 2006). Surveys from well-established global organizations such as the Transparency International CPI and the Pew Research Center survey on corruption in effect reflect the public agenda (public perception) in relation to corruption in China.

A Pew Research Centre survey in 2015 finds a lot of Chinese acknowledging corruption as a problem among top government officials with 84% expressing concern of corrupt officials as a *big* problem and 44% saying it is a *very big* problem. The results, however, shown a downward trend of 10% from 2014 when 54% of Chinese cited corrupt officials as a *very big* problem.²³ Transparency International survey in 2017 on the level of changes in corruption over the past three years (as of 2017) also found that 73% of Chinese thought the level of corruption has worsened.²⁴ Despite citizens acknowledging corruption as a major concern or worsening, the general perception of corruption in China has been improving over the past three years based on the Transparency International CPI scores and ranking. The CPI shows a positive reception in three successive years beginning 2015 (see table 2) after it plummeted in 2014 from 80th spot to 100th - China’s worst ever performance since the CPI began in 1995. Coincidentally, 2014 marked the height of the anti-graft drive. Thus, 2014 recorded the highest number of implicated top/ high-level officials (*tigers*) by the CCDI (see table 1). A 2017 local survey (reported by Xinhua) also reveals a significant improved public perception

²² McCombs and Estrada (1997) cited in Jasperson et al., (1998).

²³ Pew Research Centre: Global Attitude and Trends, “Corruption, Pollution, Inequality are top Concerns in China” September 24, 2015. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/09/24/corruption-pollution-inequality-are-top-concerns-in-china/>

²⁴ Transparency International, “People and Corruption: Asia Pacific”, February 2017.

of corruption.²⁵ Based on the survey, about 93.9% of Chinese are satisfied with the CPC’s anti-graft drive. A significant increase in approval from 75% in 2012. These successive improved performances, notably coincide with the aggressive anti-graft mass media propaganda campaign both in the traditional media and the new media detailed in the previous section.

Table 2: Global Corruption Perception Index (2012-2017).

CHINA	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
Score (%)	41	40	37	36	40	39
Rank	77 th	79 th	83 rd	100 th	80 th	80 th

Sources: Transparency International CPI

5. Findings and Concluding Remarks

The agenda-setting concept emphasizes the mass media’s role as a central gatekeeper to construct the social reality in the public’s mind - in the fact that by paying attention to some issues and neglecting some others, the mass media will have an effect on public opinion. The analysis shows that despite the fact that the influence of the mass media in shaping public perception can be substantial, that influence can be positive as well as negative. A series of media reports on the downfall of top/ high-level party and state official especially in 2014 (where an estimated total of 41 top officials, including 4 national party/state officials and 7 provincial/ministerial officials was implicated) had a negative effect on public perception on the pervasiveness of corruption. However, a unified, positive mass media reportage and propaganda drive on how both ‘*tigers*’ and ‘*flies*’ have been rooted out have had some positive influence on public perception on the pervasiveness of corruption.

In conclusion, despite the explosive growth and commercialization of the mass media (both traditional and new media) in China, the CPC, and the state continues to reinforce control over the media to shape public perception. In other words, setting the public agenda (i.e.

²⁵ Xinhua, “China punishes 159,100 in anti-graft campaign in 2017”, Xinhua, January 7, 2018.

influencing public opinion) through the mass media has been relied upon as an effective tool for guiding public opinion by the CPC and the Chinese government. The highly-censored media has thus led to the public being (to a lesser extent) provided with a measured sensitive information. In the case of the massive anti-graft drive, for instance, the media has reciprocated by dancing between the party and the state line on rooting corrupt individuals and practices from the system through the propagation of positive anti-graft commentaries and articles, as well as propaganda movies. These series of party and media propaganda has translated to public judgment as demonstrated by China's record in both the global and local corruption perception surveys within the period studied. The best attributable explanatory factor (by inference) of China's recent improved Corruption Perception performance is the mass media anti-graft propaganda.

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