

Intra-Party Rules: Rebuilding the Chinese Communist Party's Political Ecology

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Abstract

This article offers an in-depth analysis of intra-party rules development within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012. Through examining fifty-three major intra-party rules, leaders' speeches, media articles, and 9,412 punishment verdicts, the study uncovers a three-stage process aimed at revitalising the CCP and constructing a “political ecology.” The analysis identifies three stages of intra-party rules development, characterised by nascent attempts to define political–moral and organisational norms, the tension between expansion and centralisation from 2016 onwards, and a period of deepening and advancement coupled with increasing arbitrariness in enforcement. This investigation enriches our comprehension of the intricate interplay between organisation, morality, and punishment within the CCP under Xi Jinping, shedding light on broader ramifications for China's societal structure, governance, and foreign policy approach.

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Keywords

Chinese Communist Party, intra-party rules, political ecology, norms, discipline

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Introduction

In the last decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has experienced significant development in intra-party rules. An official report from June 2022 noted that since the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012, the Party Centre issued or revised 156 rules, accounting for 70.5 per cent of currently effective central rules (Central Government, 2022). This article explores the impetus for this development as a component of a larger top-down project to rejuvenate the CCP and foster a “political ecology” (政治生态, *zhengzhi shengtai*) that would mould the party’s organisation and members to reinforce the party’s ideals and be supportive of the party’s objectives.

Xi Jinping’s analogy between natural and political ecology elucidates this drive:

Just as natural ecology requires clear mountains and clean waters, political ecology also needs clarity and purity. We must intensify the anti-corruption campaign, exert great effort to remove “decaying trees,” treat “diseased trees,” and straighten “crooked trees,” ensuring that [...] evil is completely eradicated. [...] Today’s era stands at a vital juncture leading to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (CCP Online, 2015b)

This metaphor illustrates Xi Jinping’s view of the party as a complex organism that requires internal balance, purity, and the removal of corruption. Providing the basis for Xi Jinping’s party-building project, intra-party rules are deployed to define and enforce political–moral and organisational norms within the overall party and its various subsystems down to minute protocols. This significance and expansive nature of intra-party rules is further emphasised by Samuli Seppänen, who discusses their roles in imposing disciplinary measures, defining the party’s structure, and drawing jurisdictional boundaries (Seppänen, 2022). These functions align with the party’s larger efforts to shape its internal organisational dynamics, enforce ideological purity, and remove corrupt or deviant elements.

The existing scholarship on intra-party rules can be divided into three main camps. The first camp explores the external significance of intra-party rules in the party-state relationship, probing how they clash with state laws and extend the party’s reach. Seppänen’s elaborate examination of intra-party rules and their clash with state laws leads him to ask if the party is above its own internal regulations, answering affirmatively. He also undertakes a methodological exploration to understand intra-party rules, finding traditional approaches derived from Max Weber, Viktor Fraenkel, and Carl Schmitt lacking (Seppänen, 2019, 2022). His theoretical challenge resides in the complex relationship between the intra-party rules system and the state-led legal system.

Seppänen’s approach finds its organisational expression in the discussion on the party-state relationship. Li Ling describes the intertwined relationship between party and state as a “dual normative system,” operationalised through party organisations and rules (Li, 2015). The National Supervision Commission’s establishment in 2018 exemplifies this framework, expanding the party’s reach to non-members and legalising coercive measures in disciplinary investigations (Li, 2020). Holly Snape’s insightful

discussion on intra-party rules emphasises their legislative aspect, wherein the party influences state legislation, constructing a more profound relationship between party and state systems of norms (Snape, 2019a, 2019b). This perspective primarily considers intra-party rules within the context of the party-state relationship, giving less emphasis to their internal roots within the party's broader political project.

The second camp is concerned with intra-party rules' structure, distinguishing between written and unwritten rules, and highlighting the importance of informal norms. Written rules are codified in documents such as the party constitution, while unwritten rules manifest as patterns of behaviour, such as age limits or power-sharing agreements. For example, Jiang Shigong emphasises the significance of the "unwritten constitution," which includes party leadership, the trinity of the offices of Central Military Commission Chairman, Party General Secretary, and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and central-local relations (Jiang, 2010). Shifting the conversation to the party, Ewan Smith posits that formal rules can only be fully understood through the informal norms that sustain these practices (Smith, 2021). While informal rules are vital for maintaining the CCP's structure and practices, the full significance of these rules requires an examination of the formal rules they sustain. Therefore, this article concentrates on the internal architecture and changes in written rules affecting the party.

The third camp interprets intra-party rules in the context of Xi Jinping's centralisation of power and his anti-corruption drive, underlining their role in consolidating power and ensuring political safety. While recognising the rules' potential organisational and disciplinary ramifications, scholars such as Pei Minxin observe that they have fortified protections around Xi against challenges (Pei, 2019). In a similar study, Xingmiu Liao and Wen-Hsuan Tsai explore how discipline is meted out in practice to guarantee Xi's "political safety" (Liao and Tsai, 2020). Other researchers such as Zhu Jiangnan, Zhang Qi, and Liu Zhikuo have examined rules targeting the waste of official funds, claiming they demonstrate to lower-level officials Xi's capability to enforce policy (Zhu et al., 2017). This perspective, focusing on power centralisation through deterrence and signalling, is just one aspect of the punishment system. To achieve lasting success in anti-corruption, Melanie Manion asserts that the party must foster "a norm that rules matter" (Manion, 2016), thus linking punishment and political norms. This lays the groundwork for understanding the transformative impact of moral guidelines within the party.

Furthermore, Macabe Keliher and Hsinchao Wu illuminate the importance of transforming "moral guidelines and disciplinary regulations" through anti-corruption, administrative formalisation, and moral discipline (Keliher and Wu, 2016). They ultimately posit that the goal is instilling loyalty within the party and cultivating a new political culture. Gang Chen concurs, stating that Xi targeted factionalism to forge a "new normal" for "long-term regime survival" (Chen, 2020). In a comprehensive study on anti-corruption politics, Li Ling differentiates between the ideological campaign for instilling political discipline and the disciplinary campaign for identifying and denouncing "deviants," seeing them as interconnected (Li, 2019). Kerry Brown also contributes evidence, arguing that anti-corruption serves to construct a "new party identity" besides

its punitive aims (Brown, 2018). Similarly, analysing the conduct of five ideological campaigns under Xi Jinping, Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt found that they each set different normative standards for party members (Mittelstaedt, 2023).

This article's argument engages with the perspectives of Keliher, Wu, Chen, Li, Brown, and Mittelstaedt, but it diverges from their focus on anti-corruption and ideological campaigns. Instead, the present study explores the intra-party rules system's construction as pivotal in developing a political ecology. By taking this position, this article shows that the creation and changes of rules are rooted in an internal consensus rather than a reaction to external pressures (Baranovitch, 2021). In this context, intra-party rules do not merely define organisational routines and punishments; they root these elements in changing understandings of political–moral and organisational norms. The intra-party rules system continuously adapts, linking organisational routines and punishments to evolving political–moral and organisational norms. Far from being mere administrative tools, rules therefore reflect the party's ideal archetype of organisation and membership and are vital in shaping and nurturing them, analogous to the tools utilised in maintaining a natural ecosystem. Similarly, the CCP employs punitive measures to excise members who pose a threat to its political ecology. Their dynamic development since 2012 exemplifies the shifting political, moral, and organisational requirements under Xi Jinping where intra-party rules are an important prism of how the party has attempted to reinvent itself. At the same time, the party's emphasis on political ecology led to an emphasis on stability and uniformity, resulting in centralisation and bureaucratic overreach.

The trajectory of top-down intra-party rules development since 2012 has aimed at revitalising the CCP and constructing a political ecology conducive to the party's future course and in service of a broader project. This marked a substantive change from previous periods during which intra-party rules were meant to serve limited aims and resolve specific problems. Deng Xiaoping's attempts at introducing party procedures and regulations were a response to the cultural revolution and its over-concentration of power and bureaucratism (Rule 2) (White, 1993: 172, 174). After the Tiananmen protests and the collapse of the Soviet Union, under Jiang Zemin, efforts focused on enhancing party legitimacy and competence (Fewsmith, 2013: 75). Based on a new system of formulating intra-party rules (Rule 5) this had several aspects. Firstly, to deal with corruption and the formation of small fiefdoms at the local level (Fewsmith, 2013: 72), democratic elements were inserted into local party governance (Rules 6, 7, and 9), cadre appointments (Rule 8), and assessments (Rule 13). Secondly, new punishments (Rule 12), behavioural limits (Rule 11), and formal organisational rules (Rule 10) were stipulated. While this aimed at better intra-party governance, another aim of this push was to deal with the changing nature and structure of the party that increasingly was subject to the perceived negative impact of capitalist influences. Post-2002 under Hu Jintao, the focus on intra-party democracy, which was identified as critical to the party's survival, remained. Hence, major rules were amended to further the aim of broadening and deepening intra-party democracy (Rules 8, 9, 10, and 13). Punishments were enhanced and broadened (Rule 12), with rules on inspection work being introduced for the first

time (Rule 17). These were complemented by new stipulations on cadre education (Rule 15). Under Deng, Jiang, and Hu, rules were reactive. They were not issued according to a systematic plan, were not integrated with each other, and were not in service of a broader mission, thereby falling short on the normative side. Hence, promulgated intra-party rules were fragmented and situational answers to specific problems the party encountered.

It was only after 2012 that the new leadership turned intra-party rules development into a broader project of constructing a political ecology. This endeavour unfolded over three distinct stages. During the first stage, from mid-2012 to the end of 2015, leaders established a nascent attempt to connect political–moral norms to punishment and routines, symbolising the early efforts to comprehensively treat “decaying” and “diseased” trees, though the attempt to root punishment and routines in norms was ultimately superficial. The second stage, from 2016 to the end of 2018, introduced a tension between expansion and centralisation in intra-party rules development, with norms, punitive measures, and organisational routines becoming more explicit and comprehensive, striving to rectify “crooked trees” and align organisation and members with the party centre’s aims and Xi Jinping’s emerging guiding ideology. The third stage commenced in early 2019, marking a new era where the party’s norms extended their “reach beyond the party” (Snape, 2019b: 256), intensifying political–moral and organisational norms, expanding punishment, and deepening routines, focusing on preserving “clear mountains and clear waters.” The political ecology devised under Xi through intra-party rules is meant to influence both the ideological orientation and the pragmatic behaviour of CCP cadres and members, intertwining thoughts with actions to reinforce the party’s objectives.

To substantiate these arguments, the article draws on a diverse set of sources. The primary dataset consists of fifty-three major intra-party rules (see Table 1) that are supplemented by leaders’ speeches and media articles. Furthermore, I gathered over 9,412 punishment verdicts of disgraced central and provincial officials from 2012 to March 2023, offering insights into the enforcement of political–moral and organisational norms. The synthesis of these sources paints a comprehensive picture of the party’s centralised effort to reconstruct its political, moral, and organisational framework. The article subsequently lays out a theoretical framework to elucidate the concept of “political ecology,” followed by an examination of the three periods before reaching its conclusion.

Political Ecology

In the existing literature, the term “political ecology” has often been associated with the political–economic aspects of environmental dilemmas (Yeh, 2015), or the broader relationship between humans and their environment (Yeh, O’Brien and Ye, 2013). Joseph Fewsmith, however, has connected it to China’s anti-corruption drive, highlighting corruption as “endemic” and “deeply rooted” within the nation’s political fabric (Fewsmith 2015). This connection finds resonance with Xi Jinping’s analogy, juxtaposing natural

Table I. Selected Intra-Party Rules (Effective as of August 2023).

Rule number	Year	Rule change	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Party constitution (党章 <i>dang zhang</i>)				
Rule 1	1982	1987, 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2022	中国共产党章程 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang zhangcheng</i>)	Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party
Norms (准则 <i>zhunze</i>)				
Rule 2	1980		关于党内政治生活的若干准则 (<i>Guanyu dangnei zhengzhi shenghuo de ruogan zhunze</i>)	Several norms on the party's political life
Rule 3	1997	2015	中国共产党廉洁自律准则 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang lianjie zilü zhunze</i>)	Norms on integrity and self-discipline
Rule 4	2016		关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则 (<i>Guanyu xin xingshi xia dangnei zhengzhi shenghuo de ruogan zhunze</i>)	Several norms on the party's political life under the new circumstances
Regulations (条例 <i>tiaoli</i>)				
Rule 5	1990	2012, 2019	中国共产党党内法规制定条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei fagui zhiding tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on the formulation of party rules
Rule 6	1990	2020	中国共产党基层组织选举工作条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang jiceng zuzhi xuanju gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on the election of grassroots party organisations
Rule 7	1993	2020	中国共产党地方组织选举工作条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang difang zuzhi xuanju gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on the election of local party organisations
Rule 8	1995	2002, 2014, 2019	党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例 (<i>Dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on the selection and appointment of party and government leading cadres
Rule 9	1995	2004, 2020	中国共产党党员权利保障条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangyuan quanli baozhang tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on safeguarding the rights of party members
Rule 10	1995	2004, 2020	中国共产党地方委员会工作条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang difang weiyuanhui gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on the work of local committees

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Rule number	Year	Rule change	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Rule 11	1997	2013	党政机关厉行节约反对浪费条例 (<i>Dangzheng jiguan lixing jieyue fandui langfei tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on thrift and anti-waste practices in party and government organs
Rule 12	1997	2003, 2015, 2018	中国共产党纪律处分条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang jilü chufen tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on disciplinary punishment
Rule 13	1998	2009, 2019	党政领导干部考核工作条例 (<i>Dangzheng lingdao ganbu kaohe gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on the assessment of party and government leading cadres
Rule 14	2003	2016	中国共产党党内监督条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei jiandu tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on intra-party supervision
Rule 15	2006	2015	干部教育培训工作条例 (<i>Ganbu jiaoyu peixun gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on cadre education and training
Rule 16	2009	2021	中国共产党普通高等学校基层组织工作条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang putong gaodeng xuexiao jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on grassroots organisational work in institutions of higher education
Rule 17	2009	2015, 2017	中国共产党巡视工作条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang xunshi gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on party inspection work
Rule 18	2015	2020	中国共产党统一战线工作条例 (试行) (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang tongyi zhanxian gongzuo tiaoli (shixing)</i>)	Regulations on United Front work (trial)
Rule 19	2015	2019	中国共产党党组工作条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangzu gongzuo tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on party group work
Rule 20	2016	2019	中国共产党问责条例 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang wenze tiaoli</i>)	Regulations on accountability
Rule 21	2017		中国共产党工作机关条例 (试行) (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang gongzuo jiguan tiaoli (shixing)</i>)	Regulations on party work organs (trial)
Rule 22	2018		中国共产党支部工作条例 (试行) (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang zhibu gongzuo tiaoli (shixing)</i>)	Regulations on party branch work (trial)

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Rule number	Year	Rule change	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Rule 23	2019		中国共产党政法工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang zhengfa gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on political and legal work
Rule 24	2019		中国共产党重大事项请示报告条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang zhongda shixiang qingshi baogao tiaoli)	Regulations on reporting major matters
Rule 25	2019		中国共产党党员教育管理工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang dangyuan jiaoyu guanli gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on education and management of party members
Rule 26	2019		中国共产党机构编制工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang jigou bianzhi gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on organisational establishment
Rule 27	2019		中国共产党宣传工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang xuanchuan gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on propaganda work
Rule 28	2019		中国共产党农村工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang nongcun gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on rural work
Rule 29	2019		中国共产党国有企业基层组织工作条例 (试行) (Zhongguo gongchandang guoyou qiye jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli (shixing))	Regulations on grassroots organisational work of state-owned enterprises (trial)
Rule 30	2020		中国共产党中央委员会工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on the work of the Central Committee
Rule 31	2021		中国共产党组织工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on organisational work
Rule 32	2022		信访工作条例 (Xinfang gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on petition work
Rule 33	2022		中国共产党政治协商工作条例 (Zhongguo gongchandang zhengzhi xieshang gongzuo tiaoli)	Regulations on political consultation work
Provisions (规定 <i>guiding</i>)				
Rule 34	1990	2016	县以上党和国家机关党员领导干部民主生活会若干规定 (Xian yishang dang he	Several provisions on democratic life meetings of party and state organs ⁷

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Rule number	Year	Rule change	Title in Chinese	Title in English
			<i>guojia jiguan dangyuan lingdao ganbu minzhu shenghuo hui ruogan guiding</i>	members on and above county-level
Rule 35	2006	2013	党政机关国内公务接待管理规定 (<i>Dangzheng jiguan guonei gongwu jiedai guanli guiding</i>)	Provisions on the management of domestic official receptions in party and government organs
Rule 36	2009	2018	中央企业领导人员管理规定 (<i>Zhongyang qiye lingdao ren yuan guanli guiding</i>)	Provisions on the management of leading personnel in central enterprises
Rule 37	2012		关于改进工作作风、密切联系群众的八项规定 (<i>Guanyu gaijin gongzuo zuofeng, miqie lianxi qunzhong de ba xiang guiding</i>)	Eight-point provisions on improving cadre work style and closely linking up with the masses
Rule 38	2012	2019	中国共产党党内法规和规范性文件备案审查规定 (<i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei fagui he guifanxing wenjian bei'an shencha guiding</i>)	Provisions on the filing and review of party rules and normative documents
Rule 39	2015	2022	推进领导干部能上能下若干规定 (试行) (<i>Tuijin lingdao ganbu neng shang neng xia ruogan guiding (shixing)</i>)	Provisions on promoting cadre mobility (trial)
Rule 40	2017	2022	中共中央政治局关于加强和维护党中央集中统一领导的若干规定 (<i>Zhongong zhongyang zhengzhiju guanyu jiaqiang he weihu dangzhongyang jizhong tongyi lingdao de ruogan guiding</i>)	Several provisions on strengthening and upholding the centralised and unified leadership of the party Central Committee
Rule 41	2018		党组讨论和决定党员处分事项工作程序规定 (试行) (<i>Dangzu taolun he jue ding dangyuan chufen shixiang gongzuo chengxu guiding (shixing)</i>)	Provisions on the procedure for discussing and deciding on disciplinary measures for party members (trial)
Rule 42	2019		中央和国家机关严格党的组织生活制度的若干规定 (试行) (<i>Zhongyang he</i>	Several provisions on strict implementation of the party's organisational

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Rule number	Year	Rule change	Title in Chinese	Title in English
			<i>guojia jiguan yange dang de zuzhi shenghuo zhidu de ruogan guiding (shixing)</i>	life system in central and state organs (trial)
Rule 43	2019		中国共产党党内法规执行责任制规定（试行）(<i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei fagui zhixing zerenzhi guiding (shixing)</i>)	Provisions on implementing the responsibility system for party rules (trial)
Rule 44	2020		党委（党组）落实全面从严治党主体责任规定 (<i>Dangwei (dangzu) luoshi quanmian congyan zhi dang zhuti zeren guiding</i>)	Provisions on implementing party committees' (party groups) main responsibility for strict party governance
Rule 45	2021		中国共产党组织处理规定（试行）(<i>Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhi chuli guiding (shixing)</i>)	Provisions on handling party organisation affairs (trial)
Rule 46	2022		领导干部配偶、子女及其配偶经商办企业管理规定 (<i>Lingdao ganbu pei'ou, zinu ji qi pei'ou jingshang ban qiye guanli guiding</i>)	Provisions on the management of business and enterprise of leading cadres' spouses, children, and their spouses
Measures (办法 <i>banfa</i>)				
Rule 47	2015		党委(党组)意识形态工作责任制实施办法 (<i>Dangwei (dangzu) yishi xingtai gongzuo zerenzhi shishi banfa</i>)	Implementation measures for party committees' (party group) ideological work responsibility system
Rule 48	2018		中央和国家机关各部门机关党委书记、副书记和机关纪委书记任职谈话实施办法 (<i>Zhongyang he guojia jiguan ge bumen jiguan dangwei shuji, fu shuji he jiguan jiwei shuji renzhi tanhua shishi banfa</i>)	Implementation measures for interviewing appointed party secretaries, deputy secretaries, and disciplinary commission secretaries in central and state organs
Rule 49	2018	2020	中央和国家机关干部职工思想动态分析报告办法 (<i>Zhongyang he guojia jiguan ganbu zhigong sixiang dongtai fenxi baogao banfa</i>)	Measures for reporting and analysing the ideological dynamics of cadres and workers in central and state organs

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Rule number	Year	Rule change	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Rule 50	2019		党委（党组）书记抓基层党建工作述职评议考核办法（试行）（ <i>Dangwei (dangzu) shuji zhua jiceng dangjian gongzuo shuzhi pingyi kaohe banfa (shixing)</i> ）	Evaluation and assessment measures for the party committee (party group) secretary in charge of grassroots party building (trial)
Procedures (规则 <i>guize</i>)				
Rule 51	2017		中国共产党党委（党组）理论学习中心组学习规则（ <i>Zhongguo gongchandang dangwei (dangzu) lilun xuexi zhongxin zu xuexi guize</i> ）	Procedures for study in party committees' (party group) theoretical learning groups
Detailed rules (细则 <i>xize</i>)				
Rule 52	1990	2014	中国共产党发展党员工作细则（ <i>Zhongguo gongchandang fazhan dangyuan gongzuo xize</i> ）	Detailed rules for the recruitment and development work of party members
Rule 53	2017		中共中央政治局贯彻落实中央八项规定的实施细则（ <i>Zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhiju guanche luoshi zhongyang ba xiang guiding de shishi xize</i> ）	Detailed implementation rules of the Chinese Communist Party's politburo for carrying out the eight-point provisions

Note: Rules are extracted from the 党章党规 (*dangzhang danggui*, party constitution and party rules) database, available at <https://www.12371.cn/special/dnfg/> and the Peking University Law database.

ecology with political ecology and serving as a fulcrum for interpreting the party's systematic and integrative approach to intra-party rules development and the broader party-building project.

Emile Durkheim's insights into discipline and morality offer a significant perspective for understanding Xi Jinping's concept of political ecology. The first dimension here is routines. For Durkheim, the crux of morality is encapsulated in "repetitive behavior under determinate conditions" (Durkheim, 1961: 42), making routine establishment pivotal for instilling the "spirit of discipline," the bedrock of morality (Durkheim, 1961: 31). Such discipline splits into two realms: organisational and moral. While organisational discipline governs physical conduct, moral discipline delineates the acceptable scope of individual behaviour. Xi's call for a "clean" political ecology, emphasising the CCP's organisational well-being, mirrors Durkheim's "spirit of discipline," whereby organisational routines prescribe the constraints and boundaries for members and foster particular political-moral norms.

Durkheim's second facet, punishment, finds a parallel in the metaphor of "decaying" or "diseased trees" that necessitate removal. Much like Durkheim acknowledges society's enforcement role, Xi highlights the CCP's duty to uphold rules. Punishment acts as a safeguard, preserving political-moral and organisational norms from transgressions that may gradually erode their authority (Durkheim, 1961: 167). The third facet, generality, involves Durkheim's assertion that norms must adhere to social averages instead of exceptional models, allowing individuals to strive for attainable standards rather than unfeasible ideals.

In China's context, the interplay between morality and discipline is distinctive. Børge Bakken observes challenges in disentangling moral from disciplinary factors, noting two primary variations from Durkheim's model (Bakken, 2000: 85–86). First, morality derives from a stringent, model-oriented concept of conduct, where models represent the "exemplary," that is more rigid than average-based standards (Bakken, 2000: 218). External authorities champion these models by propagating moral and organisational norms (Manion, 1993: 38–43), establishing high benchmarks for individuals and party cells that increase in complexity over time.

Second, in China, punishments aim to defend the party's elevated goals, including compliance with the party line and its guiding ideology. Any deviations, even minor ones, call for penalties, administered either by external authorities or individual party organisations. This emphasis on enforcing exemplary conduct results in an intricate punishment system and detailed organisational protocols. Bakken asserts that intra-party rules reflect this dynamic, urging party members to aspire to exemplary status through regulations (Bakken, 2000: 172), and culminating in stringent norms and principles for punishment and enforcement. Frederick Teiwes describes this as fostering "positive behavioral" and "attitudinal" compliance (Teiwes, 1993: 36). In Xi's vision of political ecology, centrally determined and codified norms guide punitive actions and routines, with an inherent adaptability over time. In accordance with Xi's metaphor, changing norms identify which "trees" are "crooked," and necessitate correction using broader punishments and stricter organisational routines. This system transcends mere individual virtue (Shirk, 1982) and is more akin to Andrew Walder's "principled particularism" (Walder, 1986) that is institutionalised as "organisational principles" (Doyon, 2018) and involves the continuous alignment with the proper and exemplary virtue by both the individual party member and the party cell.

The development of this intra-party rules system was a complex undertaking. Only by mid-2014 were the moral, organisational, and punitive aspects tentatively integrated under the umbrella of "political ecology." The initial approach proved too abstract, precipitating the onset of a second period. Late in 2016, rules promulgation accelerated, concretising the connection between political morality, organisational norms, and comprehensive punishment and routines, and introducing a tension between growing rules diversity and centralisation. A third period emerged in early 2019, marked by the enhancement and deepening of moral and organisational exemplary standards, the widening of rules, and their extension into non-party domains. These transformations were anchored in a shifting political understanding, consequently broadening the reach of

existing punishment rules and organisational routines. Subsequent sections will delve into each of these periods, detailing their intricacies.

Exploration and Linkage (2012–2015)

The first significant period of transformation commenced during Hu Jintao's final months as General Secretary and is defined by two critical actions. First, new regulations on intra-party rule formulation were introduced in May 2012, outlining the relationship between exemplary norms and enforcement methods (Rule 5). This rule replaced a 1990 provisional draft and clarified the hierarchy of intra-party rules, defining different rule types for the first time. The party constitution occupies the highest position, with "Norms" (准则, *zhunze*) below it, guiding the party's political and organisational life and member behaviour (Article 4). Next are "Regulations" (条例, *tiaoli*), followed by lower-level rules. Norms set the exemplary standard for political–moral and organisational standards, while all other rules detail methods to achieve these aims.

The second defining factor for the intra-party rules system was a sweeping reset between 2012 and 2014. During this period, officials collected 23,000 documents issued by the party centre, dating from October 1949 to June 2012, including 1,178 intra-party rules and normative documents (*CCP News*, 2014). Of these, 58.7 per cent (691 rules and documents) were abolished or declared invalid. While coupled with new rules for rules standardisation and unity (Rule 38), this signified a major departure from the past, this break was not thorough. Of the fifty-three major intra-party rules considered in the remainder of this article that as of August 2023 are still effective, two were drafted under Deng Xiaoping, twelve under Jiang Zemin, and seven under Hu Jintao. However, all except one (Rule 2) were changed under Xi, showcasing his impact.

Despite progress, the party urgently needed anti-corruption measures. The "Eight-Point Provisions on Improving Cadre Work Style and Closely Linking up with the Masses" ("Eight Provisions") filled this need (Rule 37), introducing requirements for shortening meetings, regulating official trips, and curtailing waste, among others. Although followed by related rules on curtailing official receptions (Rule 35) and waste (Rule 11), the "Eight Provisions" were not initially integrated into the intra-party rules system and lacked a focused political–moral and organisational purpose. Their integration only occurred in 2018, when they were realigned to serve a broader political–moral objective.

The foundation for overhauling the intra-party rules system was laid through forceful rhetoric. In 2013, Xi Jinping ascribed the fall of the Soviet Union to ideological conflicts leading to historical nihilism, confused thinking, and defunct party organisations (Xi, 2019a). The Politburo echoed Xi's statements, articulating that managing and administering the party had become more arduous due to wavering ideals among party members, weakened organisation and discipline, and degenerate thoughts. These shortcomings impacted the party's vitality, image, and effectiveness (*CCP News*, 2013). Zhao Leji, the newly appointed Central Organisation Department Director, underscored the importance of building beliefs and organisational discipline. He connected the "Eight

Provisions” to a broader effort to establish long-term mechanisms for enhancing the party’s working style (Zhao, 2013b). Later that year, Zhao convened the first national forum on party member development and management, emphasising the need to “strictly enforce the daily management of party members” (Zhao, 2013a). This initial phase saw leadership comments setting the goal of party-building as creating exemplary political–moral and organisational norms, supported by punishments and organisational routines.

With increasing consensus on the importance of political–moral and organisational norms, the party started to link them rhetorically to punishment and routines. The Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Central Committee spotlighted both the party’s institutional and ideological growth, encouraging enhancements to party organisations’ institutional systems. In his commentary, Zhao Leji emphasised the observation of “cadres’ morals” and their cultivation as integral to this effort. This emphasis was followed by the first five-year plan for intra-party rules construction, aiming to “standardise intra-party life” and supervise the “operation of power.” Long-term strategies ensured that exemplary norms would be supported by an expanding set of punitive rules and organisational procedures in the future.

The hierarchical relationship between political and organisational norms became foundational in constructing a pure “political ecology,” a concept first emerging in June 2014 with two main components. The first was a shift towards political morality, illustrated by the dismissal and investigation of four Shanxi provincial party committee members in August 2014. The upheaval led to an emphasis on political discipline, with Xi Jinping highlighting its non-negotiable importance (*CCP News*, 2017). The second component focused on “ideological party-building” and “institutional party governance” as the basis of political ecology. Following rules amendments that diminished democratic recommendation in cadre selection processes in favour of suggestions (Rule 8; for an analysis, see Doyon, 2018), this was reflected in updated recruitment rules (Rule 52) that emphasised developing party members from the right backgrounds and improving member quality through training and daily management (Chinese Government Online, 2014). The resulting exemplary standard for newly recruited members had immediate effects, slowing growth until the formation of the intra-party rules system, with growth rebounding to 3.7 per cent in 2021.

The latter half of 2015 witnessed the introduction of five intra-party rules that gave preliminary form to the new system. First, in August 2015, rules regarding inspection work were issued (Rule 17), updating a provisional rule from 2009. Accompanying this, new measures on ideological work were enforced (Rule 47). Zhao Leji characterised them as the “integration of ideological party-building with institutional party governance.” These regulations brought standardisation to inspection work at various levels and defined responsibilities more clearly. Crucially, supervision was designed to oversee “the implementation of the CCP’s party constitution and other intra-party rules,” as well as party members’ role in fostering a positive working style and clean government. As articulated by Zhao, these rules enhanced the “institutionalization and standardization of inspection work,” fostering the “normalization and enduring impact of strict party governance” (Zhao, 2015). Along with regulations governing the promotion and

demotion of cadres (Rule 39), these rules re-oriented organisational routines to serve political and moral norms.

In October 2015, the promulgation of three additional intra-party rules within a week marked the completion of the framework. Among them, the “Regulations on Cadre Education and Training” were introduced, evolving from a 2006 draft (Rule 15). Addressing the deficiency in the education of ideals and beliefs in certain localities and departments, these regulations became the first intra-party rules to codify cadre education and training. While Zhao Leji chastised some cadres for embracing superstitions and Western ideologies, he simultaneously emphasised the need to maintain political power and adhere to the correct path. Importantly, he connected this to the realisation of the “two centenary” goals and the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation. Cadre education was shaped to align with these overarching aims. Zhao noted the rules’ dual function: enhancing ideological party-building through spiritual empowerment and strengthening institutional party governance by establishing educational structures such as party schools and teachers. The regulations underscored ideals, beliefs, and party spirit and were aligned with new enforcement rules in party groups (Rule 19).

In articulating these standardised training measures, the CCP’s long-term objectives crystallised around an exemplary standard, guiding the development of organisational routines to ensure adaptability and alignment with overarching goals. This approach echoes Xi Jinping’s metaphor, where changing norms identify the “crooked trees” that need realignment through more rigorous routines. More significantly, this perspective reveals the inherent complexities of the intra-party rules project, rooted in the understanding of political ecology. Thus, given the elusive nature of the party’s aspirations in realising the “China Dream” and the “two centenary” goals, grounding concrete punishments and organisational routines in an abstract and utopian ideal calls for detailed elaborations and policies rather than broad ideals that can be interpreted arbitrarily. This introduces a tension between the need for expanding the number of rules and their complexity while keeping diversity and variability at bay through centralisation. Concurrently, the contradictory pressures may also induce passivity among cadres, who wait for signals from the top. This alignment of principles and practice reveals the gap between aspirational political–moral ideals and the practicalities of on-the-ground organisational operations.

This manifested itself during the same week, when two other intra-party rules, the “Regulations on Disciplinary Punishment” (Rule 12) and “Norms on Integrity and Self-Discipline” (“Norms on Integrity”) (Rule 3), were enacted to fully articulate political–moral standards, reinforced by punitive sanctions. Based on provisional norms from 1997, the integrity norms constituted the first standard for integrity and self-discipline for all party members since the CCP’s rise to power. The succinct “Norms on Integrity,” containing only eight articles and 156 characters, communicate critical principles and encapsulate the standards expected of party members. Article 1 underlines the distinction between personal and public affairs, urging members to devote themselves to the public interest, while Article 2 emphasises integrity and anti-corruption. Articles 3 and 4 extol frugality and dedication, respectively. Articles 5 and 6 elaborate on governing

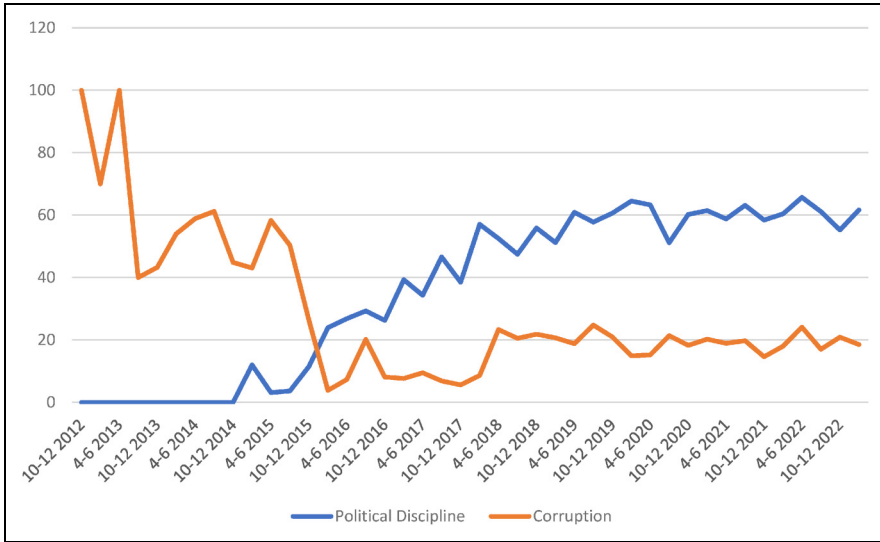


Figure 1. Mentions of “political discipline” and “corruption”, in per cent of political verdicts ($n = 9,412$).

Source: Author’s compilation based on CCDI (Central Commission for Discipline Investigation) and provincial-level CDI (Commission for Discipline Investigation) reports.

with integrity to serve and uphold the people’s interests. Article 7 fosters the development of moral character and the promotion of ideological values, and Article 8 mandates cadres to manage their households with integrity, thus setting a positive familial example. Representing a high benchmark for conduct, these norms defined the ideal cadre behaviour and provided a model for party members (CCP Online, 2015a). Though the rules do not directly connect to organisational norms, their significance is accentuated by their association with the disciplinary punishment rules.

In adherence to the “Norms on Integrity” (Rule 3), the “Regulations on Disciplinary Punishment” (Rule 12) establish a critical boundary that neither party organisations nor members may cross (Sina, 2015). Supplanting a 2003 predecessor, officials identified three main shortcomings necessitating this update. First, the 2003 regulations lacked accountability measures for breaches that compromised the party’s authority (CCP Online, 2015b). Second, they failed to differentiate between disciplinary measures and legal ones, leading to an overlap with almost half of the clauses in the PRC’s Criminal Law. This redundancy caused party members to be judged by the same standards as regular citizens rather than a higher, more aspirational standard, thus diluting expectations for party members. Finally, the 2003 version required modifications to mirror the developments post-2012, including linkages to norms and rhetoric. The 2015 “Regulations on Disciplinary Punishment” (Rule 12) were thus amended to segregate them from Criminal Law and align them with the new “Norms on Integrity” (Rule 3).

Punishment rules within the party serve as a deterrent against non-compliance, articulating explicit consequences for those who fail to meet the party's exemplary standards, thus reinforcing adherence to integrity norms among members. This relationship between integrity norms and punishment methods can be examined through the evolution of punishment regulations. In the 2003 version, the rules are positioned in accordance with the "Party Constitution," "State Constitution," "Law," and "Party-building practice" (Rule 12). By 2015, the exclusive emphasis on the party constitution signified a departure from state law, aligning more closely with the party constitution–norms–regulations hierarchy initiated and broadened in 2012. This shift led to a reduction in the number of articles from 178 to 133 and a decrease in character count from 24,000 to 17,000. Though the 2015 "Regulations on Disciplinary Punishment" (Rule 12) did not incorporate the 2012 "Eight Provisions" (Rule 37), they were not a step back. Instead, they refined and aligned more closely with the emerging intra-party rules system and the party's overarching objectives and exemplary norms. This redefinition of discipline extended its reach to include areas such as political, organisational, integrity, mass, work, and lifestyle, while omitting earlier chapters on corruption, socialist economic order, and financial discipline. While this change resulted in a more concise and narrower scope, it sharpened the focus on penalising deviations from the exemplary norm.

However, the synchronisation of punishment methods with the "Norms on Integrity" (Rule 3) remained tenuous. For example, Article 126 penalised "luxurious lifestyles" and "hedonism," and Article 128 addressed violations of "public order" and "inappropriate conduct." The transition from "socialist morality" in 2003's version of Article 154 to "public morality or family virtues" in 2015's Article 129 further illustrates this misalignment. Consequently, the punishment rules failed to directly reinforce the party's political–moral objectives. This incongruity reveals a wider issue: lacking well-defined political and organisational norms, the punishment rules suffered from a vague basis for enforcement. Despite surface-level rhetorical connections, the implemented punishments emerged as significantly divergent.

Nonetheless, the new rules marked a discernible shift in disciplinary focus, exemplified by the amplified emphasis on political discipline and the reduced salience of corruption as a category in political verdicts (see Figure 1). This trend indicates an escalating concentration on political–moral principles within the party. Until mid-2015, corruption stood as a principal rationale for disciplining party members. Post-re-categorisation in the new 2015 punishment rules, the term "corruption" was subsumed under the other categories and vanished from the new classifications, which resulted in fewer mentions in political verdicts. It only revived in mid-2018 and subsequently stabilised. Though anti-corruption efforts persisted in importance, they were eclipsed by the growth of "political discipline." Despite being important in both the 2003 and 2015 punishment rules, "political discipline" was rarely invoked before late 2015. Only after then its enforcement increased, stabilising at approximately 60 per cent of political verdicts by mid-2019. One reason was new violations of disregarding central decisions, displaying "incorrect thinking," forming cliques, and disrupting party unity. The most salient addition, however, was the inclusion of violations related to "organizational inspection," encompassing

actions such as fabricating, destroying, or concealing evidence, and obstructing or harbouring offenders. This shift corresponds with the party's broader conceptualisation of "political ecology," signifying a move from an exclusive focus on corruption to a more comprehensive and complex understanding encompassing broader organisational and moral concerns found to be at its root.

This phase marked the party's early attempt to construct an exemplary norm, supported by punishment and organisational arrangements. The reliance on the exemplary standard as the guiding force uncovers a major problem: the routines and punishments must inherently expand everywhere, mirroring the abstract and utopian nature of the ideals themselves. The transition from targeting corruption to enforcing political discipline showcases this challenge: broadened standards create an expansive arena for potential individual deviations, demanding a more inclusive, far-reaching, and ultimately more subjective approach to punishment. Indeed, from 2016 onwards, deviation would slowly transform into a fluid and elusive target, leading to uncertainties and ambiguities in delineating both acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In this complex landscape, political-moral norms remained nebulous, and the existing punishments and routines were found to be inadequate for enforcing them.

In all, the concerted implementation of regulations on inspection, accountability, education, integrity, and punishment generated mixed outcomes. Despite constituting a substantial expansion (Li, 2019), the integration of these rules proved less than satisfactory. However, while integration may have been deficient, disciplinary authorities were nonetheless motivated to operationalise an ecological and holistic view of party discipline. The gradual alignment with prevailing political-moral principles reflects the party's broader approach to political ecology, akin to the metaphorical process of getting rid of "rotten trees" and straightening up the "crooked" ones. Equally important, the shift away from state law signalled the party's intention to establish a separate and distinct standard for its members separate from the formal criminal system. This signifies the transformation of the party that first focused on its internal governance and value systems before eventually expanding them outside, as noted with reference to ideological campaigns (Mittelstaedt, 2023).

Consequently, this sets the stage for both endless expansion and the arbitrary nature of enforcement. The subsequent phase, from 2016 until early 2019, further accentuated this situation, illustrating the nuanced interplay between exemplary political-moral norms, punishments, and organisational routines, while showcasing the sprawling expansion of the intra-party rules system.

Expansion and Centralisation (2016–2019)

During the second period, from 2016 until early 2019, the expansion of intra-party rules became a prominent feature within the party, reflecting the holistic and interconnected nature of the political ecology concept. This expansion necessitated policing and regulating all areas, leading to a complex web of intricate and specialised intra-party rules. This growth coincided with an effort to anchor punishments and organisational routines in new

rules, aiming to outline an exemplary political–moral standard rooted in the Central Committee with Xi Jinping at its “core,” mirroring Bakken’s observation of “scientification” in morality (Bakken, 2000: 253). This approach epitomises the paradoxical nature of an idealised political ecology, where the attempt to cover every domain within the party inherently introduces diversity even as it strives for centralisation. Consequently, the period is marked by a tension between the desire for a comprehensive system that encompasses every aspect of party life, and the simultaneous striving for centralised alignment with core political–moral standards.

In 2016, the fusion of political–moral and organisational norms with punishment and routines became a central theme, resonating with Aleksandra Kubat’s claim of “moral improvement and virtue-infused governance” within the party (Kubat, 2018). In October, the Central Committee issued expansive “Regulations on Intra-Party Supervision” (Rule 14) (“Supervision Regulations”) and “Several Norms on Intra-Party Political Life” (Rule 4) (“Life Norms”). These went beyond the previous, concise “Norms on Integrity” (Rule 3) and encompassed both political–moral and organisational standards. Xi Jinping drew parallels between the current situation and the post-cultural revolution period that also resulted in similar norms (Rule 2) and highlighted a wavering in party members’ beliefs and organisational weakness (Xi, 2016). He therefore compared Hu Jintao’s leadership with the late Mao era, an unflattering comparison later inked into the 2021 History Resolution. The rules were thus positioned as a holistic answer to high levels of corruption in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Wedeman, 2012) and a corrective measure to establish a clean political ecology.

The norms (Rule 4) set forth a dual focus on individual political beliefs shaped through organisational norms. They outline a range of exemplary standards, including protecting the party centre’s authority, fostering the party’s relationship with the people, promoting intra-party democracy, and instituting a clean organisational life. Organisational norms were depicted as instrumental in guiding, overseeing, and forging party members, with the ultimate emphasis placed on a comprehensive view of political and organisational life. Three significant aspects of these norms underscore the period’s complex dynamics: a shift from corruption to developing political ecology; the holistic view of the party’s organisational life; and the necessity for all-encompassing discipline, including regulating all aspects of party members’ lives. A concrete result was making party groups responsible for punishing their members. Hence, new rules on supervision emphasised two dimensions (Rule 14): alignment with “Life Norms” and rooting punishment within the individual party organisation through the “Four Forms” (四种形态, *si zhong xingtai*). These forms ranged from “criticism and self-criticism” to light and serious punishments, and “violations of law” that are referred to criminal prosecutors. The importance of “criticism and self-criticism” that is administered by the party cell stands out. Thus, in 2017, this punishment was applied to 59.7 per cent of punished party members, rising to 67 per cent by 2022, while the use of formal prosecution remained stable at around 3.5 per cent. This highlights the importance of everyday organisational routines in enforcing political–moral and organisational norms.

The “Life Norms” (Rule 4) and “Supervision Regulations” (Rule 14) are thus intricately connected in their endeavour to fuse routines and political–moral norms. Zhao Leji observed that these rules seek to “standardize the party’s political life” and augment “intra-party supervision” (CCP Online, 2016). Elaborating on this, Xi Jinping cited examples of Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Guo Boxiong, Xu Caihou, and Ling Jihua to argue that these regulations prioritise the party’s ideological and political construction and foster a “clean and upright political ecology” (Xi, 2016). New regulations for holding cadres accountable were introduced (Rule 20), further shifting the responsibility for punishment to individual party organisations. This strategy, coupled with a focus on standardised cadre education, emphasises the party’s objective of transforming individual cadres through organisational methods. This alignment underscores how political–moral and organisational norms were operationalised in 2016.

In the lead-up to the Nineteenth Party Congress, the tension of expansion and centralisation emerged prominently. Efforts to base punishments and routines on political–moral and organisational exemplary norms gained momentum, reflecting the expansion of organisational routines through the introduction of updated rules for democratic life meetings (Rule 34) and theoretical study (Rule 51). Simultaneously, other regulations increased central control over the party’s executive organs (Rule 21). Notably, amendments to the 2015 rules on inspection reinforced organisational routines for upholding political–moral norms (Rule 17). Specifically, Article 1 clarified that inspection now includes “intra-party political life” and the purification of the party’s political ecology. These rules, emphasising the importance of maintaining the party’s purity, also reference Xi Jinping’s “core” designation and introduced “political inspection” for the first time (CCP Online, 2017). The shifting focus towards political supervision and adherence to political and organisational norms transformed the role of inspectors, emphasising loyalty (Carothers and Zhang, 2022) and becoming increasingly expansive (Doyon and Yang, 2022). By the time of the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 2017, the main framework of the intra-party rules system had been solidified, encapsulating the ongoing tension between expansion and centralisation.

The Congress heralded a significant shift by introducing “political construction” as a distinct concept and embedding Xi Jinping’s signature ideology into the party constitution (Rule 1). This evolution of the political–moral exemplary norm crystallised into two essential components: first, the commitment to safeguarding both the Centre’s unity and Xi Jinping’s core position within the party (known as the “Two Safeguards”); second, redefining the framework for interpreting “politics” through an understanding of Xi Jinping thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era (“Xi Thought”). Concurrently, the expansion was reflected in immediate revisions to both punishment structures and organisational routines. For instance, amendments to the punishment regulations (Rule 12) in late 2018 integrated Xi Jinping’s ideology and introduced more systematic approaches to punishment. Organisational rules also evolved, with specific regulations for party branches (Rule 22) formalising practices such as meetings and Thematic Party Days, thereby transforming party branches into venues for both individual assessment and organisational alignment and discipline

(Mittelstaedt, 2021). Additionally, new guidelines mandated interviews with newly appointed party secretaries, ensuring their alignment with central party objectives (Rule 48). In sum, rules development underwent a significant transformation, weaving punishments and routines into a unified framework that fortified the newly emerging political–moral and organisational norms.

Advancing and Deepening (2019–now)

During this period, the relationship between centralisation and expansion within the party’s framework underwent a significant transformation. The shift was marked by the evolving and multifaceted nature of Xi Thought, which prompted a reorientation of punishment and organisational routines towards the centre. As this ideological system expanded to include domains such as economics, law, party governance, foreign affairs, and more, it reshaped the very fabric of the party’s exemplary political–moral norms. However, this shift simultaneously introduced an arbitrary dimension; the burgeoning complexity of Xi Thought created a landscape where both rules and implementation were subject to continual transformation and reinterpretation. The party thus intensified its efforts to articulate and measure political–moral norms, further instrumentalise morality, and bolster enforcement through a growing bureaucracy. This expansion, though, cultivated a level of ambiguity that complicated the ability of individual party members, party organisations, and central authorities to discern deviations within the metaphorical landscape of “political ecology.” The challenge emerged in identifying what the “crooked trees” were and what actions were required to ensure alignment with the evolving exemplary standards, now rooted in Xi Thought.

Following the establishment of punishments and organisational routines, the party’s exemplary political–moral standard was further refined. This began with the Nineteenth Party Congress and further developed in January 2019 with the issuance of the “Opinions on Strengthening Political Construction in the CCP.” More than a mere

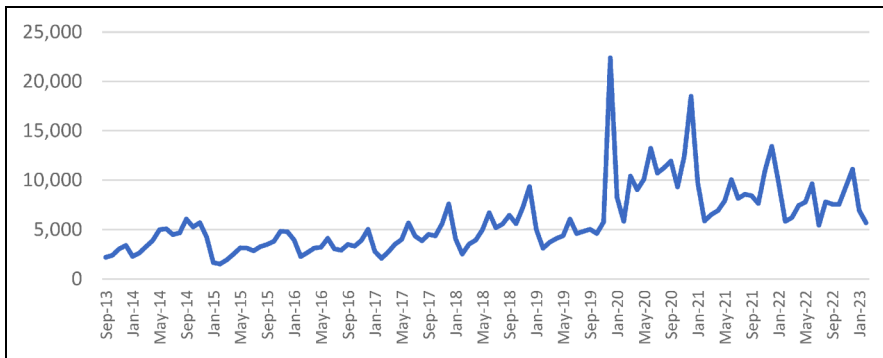


Figure 2. Monthly number of party members punished for eight-point provisions violations. Source: author’s compilation based on monthly CCDI reports.

anti-corruption slogan, this document rooted “strict party governance” in a fluid understanding of “politics” and Xi Thought. By designating political ecology construction as “foundational, everyday work,” it demanded continuous party member engagement and daily educational efforts, thus aligning with the political–moral and organisational norms set forth in the 2016 “Life Norms” (Rule 4) (CCP Online, 2019).

The significance of the opinions is manifold. First, they provided a clear definition of the content of the exemplary political–moral standard, identifying violations and situating loyalty within the framework of the “Two Safeguards.” The four key sections – political belief, political leadership, enhancing cadre abilities, and purifying the political ecology – outline political morality, now intrinsically linked to Xi Thought. Specific behaviours were identified as political transgressions, translating concepts such as “fake loyalty” and “two-faced” behaviour into actionable offences. This extended to party organisations, which were tasked with prioritising politics and combating issues such as weakness and lax management. Second, organisational norms were adjusted to place party organisations at the heart of political ecology construction. This was achieved through activities such as organisational life meetings, Thematic Party Days, and oath-taking ceremonies, all reinforcing a shift from punitive measures to fostering loyalty through everyday engagement, in alignment with the evolving nature of Xi Thought.

The establishment of the political–moral exemplary standard directly impacted subsequent developments in punishment, education, and organisational rules. Rules were amended to standardise various aspects such as party group work (Rule 19), cadre selection (Rule 8), and assessment (Rule 13). New rules were also enacted to ensure alignment with the

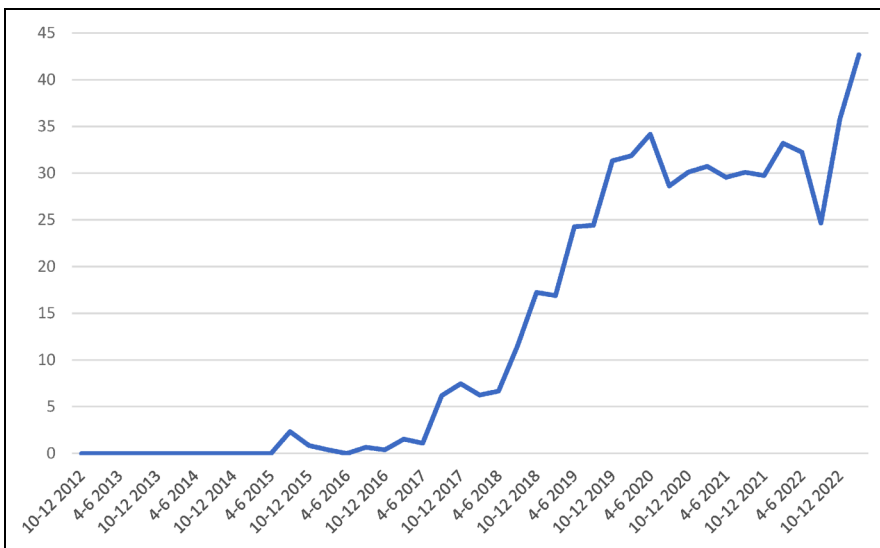


Figure 3. Violations of “political loyalty” in political verdicts, in per cent ($n = 9,412$).

Source: Author’s compilation based on CCDI and provincial-level CDI reports.

party centre's shifting priorities including staffing (Rule 26) and reporting of "major matters" (Rule 24). Institutions of intra-party political life deepened in accordance with new rules (Rule 42), and revisions to intra-party rules formulation procedures enabled the Politburo to make important rules (Snape, 2019a: 309). Organisational life, therefore, became more standardised, centralised, and more aligned with the new political environment.

Second, punitive measures were further aligned with the new political–moral standard. In a speech in January 2019, Zhao Leji reported that 25,000 individuals were punished for political deviations in 2018, marking the first disclosure of political transgressions. Equally important, the "Eight-Points Provisions" (Rule 37) underwent a redefinition in December 2019 after being reaffirmed at the Nineteenth Party Congress (Rule 53). Building on the January 2019 opinions, amendments to accountability rules (Rule 20), and new rules on enforcement (Rule 43), they now reflected a rejection of formalism and bureaucratism. Likewise, failure to follow the "Two Safeguards" was reinterpreted as non-implementation of central decisions, and failure to take responsibility was categorised as not "talking politics" (Xi, 2019b). These new categories for punishment illustrate the revised exemplary standards for cadres' accountability.

The differentiation in expectations and punishments between lower-level and higher-level cadres is vividly evident in recent data. At the local level, the focus of disciplinary action is predominantly on administrative responsibility. In November 2019, 5,779 cadres were disciplined, surging to 20,870 in December 2019, and culminating in an annual total of 124,724 – a 90 per cent increase from 2018 – before declining to 96,756 in 2022 (Figure 2). Of these cases, 41 per cent between December 2019 and January 2023 were punished for failing to "fulfil their duties," with only 1.5 per cent for non-implementation of central decisions. These figures underscore the emphasis on lower-level cadres' administrative accountability rather than political loyalty. The spike in numbers also reflects tighter organisational routines that target grassroots party members for failure to take responsibility.

In stark contrast, higher-level cadres face an entirely different set of expectations and disciplinary criteria. For them, loyalty and virtue, or what Susan L. Shirk calls "virtuocracy" (Shirk, 1982), have become paramount (Doyon and Yang, 2022). The introduction of new rules safeguarding Xi Jinping's and the Central Committee's position (Rule 40) and managing relationships within state-owned enterprises (Rule 36) further emphasised this focus. Loyalty began to gain traction in 2015, but the August 2018 amendments to the punishment rules (Rule 12) crystallised this trend. While earlier instances of political verdicts citing loyalty were sporadic – and the surge in 2015 connected to the dismissal of officials in Shanxi – a surge in 2017 corresponded with the Nineteenth Party Congress, while the subsequent decline can be attributed to institutional lag. Thus, cadres investigated in the aftermath of the Party Congress only contributed to the rise in disloyalty convictions in the third and fourth quarters of 2018. The enforcement of loyalty was therefore tied to political events and favoured campaign-like deployment (Teiwes, 1993: 24).

The 2018 amendments to punishment rules signified a critical turning point, leading to a notable rise in convictions citing disloyalty to the party in late 2018 and 2019. This peaked in the second quarter of 2020 when 34 per cent of all political verdicts mentioned

disloyalty as a reason for punishment, rebounding to 41 per cent in early 2023. Since the end of 2019, over 30 per cent of all political verdicts have consistently cited disloyalty (Figure 3). This clear departure in disciplinary focus for higher-level cadres signifies a profound transformation in cadre punishment, transforming anti-corruption into an “all-purpose tool” (Carothers, 2021) and increasing uncertainty, while giving more space to disciplinary authorities. The contrasting expectations and punishments for lower and higher-level cadres mark a complex new paradigm, where political and administrative duties are demarcated, and coercion underpins political–moral norms.

The redefinition of the “Eight-Points Provisions” (Rule 37) and the expansion of the “Regulations on Disciplinary Punishment” (Rule 12) have several implications. They anchor punishment in a more comprehensive understanding of political–moral standards established in January 2019 that are predominantly enforced organisationally. Finally, punishment acts as a deterrent, discouraging undesired actions without providing clear guidance on proper behaviour. To rectify this, the party relies on organisational routines to instil the correct values in cadres.

The post-2019 period saw a deepening emphasis on education within the party’s daily organisational practices. A new rule on education, promulgated in May 2019 (Rule 25), had two main objectives. It entrenched Xi Thought in education, requiring party members to engage with a broad array of political materials, including theory, the party constitution, intra-party rules, current policies, and party history. Secondly, it integrated study as a core aspect of daily organisational life, moving beyond mere performative reading. Activities such as Thematic Party Days, organisational life meetings, democratic appraisals, heart-to-heart talks, payment of party dues, and volunteering were utilised for comprehensive education, immersing members in party values and ideas (Mittelstaedt, 2021). This approach directly translated political–moral and organisational norms into actionable and ritualised practices, fostering a more encompassing and hands-on educational environment and showcasing the reconfiguration of the party’s political ecology at the local level.

By mid-2019, the main effort to establish political–moral and organisational norms within the party had reached a point of consolidation. Subsequent rules and plans not only adhered to foundational principles but also deepened and elaborated them. The foremost principle of prioritising politics was delineated as adherence to and study of Xi Thought. New organisational rules on Central Committee work (Rule 30) focused on Xi Jinping’s role, while a late-2019 plan stressed that leading cadres should consult Xi Jinping’s essays, speeches, and other instructions when addressing key issues and tasks.

Party organisations were charged with enforcing study and discipline in increasing complexity (Rules 31, 41, 44, and 45), bolstered by a party history study campaign from mid-2019 to January 2020. Further rules held party organisations and secretaries accountable for routine measures to reinforce belief (Rule 50), emphasised members’ obligations towards the party over their rights (Rule 9) and made leading cadres answerable for maintaining a good political ecology among relatives (Rule 46). Amended rules also lowered the threshold for demotion and transfer of officials (Rule 39). Within this

framework, Xi Thought became the party's political–moral standard, enforced both internally and externally.

Lastly, the newly consolidated party organisations were directed to assert their influence more broadly, encompassing the state itself (Snape, 2019a). New rules were introduced or amended for party groups across various sectors such as the grassroots (Rule 6), localities (Rule 7), universities (Rule 16), state-owned enterprises (Rule 29), and rural areas (Rule 28), along with rules for political consultation (Rule 33), the United Front (Rule 18), and legal entities including courts and police (Rule 23). Rules on propaganda (Rule 27) and petition work (Rule 32) were articulated to propagate party values. This effort, reflecting ongoing ideological campaigns (Mittelstaedt, 2023), signifies a consolidation that extends beyond party confines to permeate state, society, economic sectors, rural regions, and grassroots levels, subsuming non-party actors into its system of political–moral and organisational norms.

Conclusion

In any political system, common values and norms are pivotal for promoting shared goals and guiding behaviour (Keliher and Wu, 2016). The CCP's complex transformation across three phases illustrates the intricate effort to instil such unity through an evolving normative system, supported by organisational routines and punishments, and codified in rules. The first phase (mid-2012 to 2015) symbolised the nascent attempt to create an exemplary standard, but challenges left it nebulous with rudimentary integration. The second phase (until early 2019) introduced a tension between expansion and centralisation. Finally, the third phase signalled a shift with the expansion of Xi Thought, marking a new era as sanctions broadened, routinisation deepened, and the party's norms extended beyond itself and the state. This evolutionary process illuminates the intricacies in the party's drive to balance expansion, centralisation, and cohesion, akin to Xi Jinping's analogy of cultivating political ecology with the same care as natural ecology.

This analysis has several implications. For party members, the ever-changing landscape of exemplary political–moral norms, particularly as embodied in Xi Thought, signifies a constant need to adapt and stay abreast of shifts. The extensive reach of Xi Thought into all facets of governance means that party members must not only understand the central slogans but also continually monitor and align themselves with the recent developments of this thought in their respective fields. This also shows the party's attempts at balancing obedience and innovation within its membership (Doyon, 2023). Loyalty performance therefore goes beyond mere repetition of slogans; it requires adherence to the current authoritative thinking relevant to specific policy areas. This engagement demands an ongoing study of a doctrine that is both in flux and directly connected to the top leadership, permeates every policy area, and reflects the complexity and malleability of the party's ideology.

The system's inclination to broaden and intensify routines to keep up with constantly shifting central norms may result in bureaucratic overreach, thereby increasing central control, stymieing local initiative, and narrowing local discretionary spaces. This is

particularly the case since the reliance on exemplary norms makes them prone to manipulation and resistance (Bakken, 2000: 214). Routinisation may also dull cadres' interpretive abilities (Teiwes, 1993: 44–45), leading to what Iza Ding called “performative governance” (Ding, 2020) and the signalling of loyalty. Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt also observed that routinisation can foster uniformity but also potential non-compliance (Mittelstaedt, 2021). However, Bakken's observation that behavioural manifestation is vital suggests that even performative adherence may be sufficient (Bakken, 2000: 176). While the attempt at unifying thought and behaviour under this political ecology leaves the door open for either a more aligned and uniform party or a party riddled by cynicism, it also poses problems for punishments, with political loyalty becoming a catch-all phrase for all kinds of deviations that violate the political–moral exemplary standard.

More broadly, the changing development of intra-party rules has implications for how we view the institutionalisation of the CCP. Traditionally, in “institutionalist” accounts, institutions have always been understood as being underpinned by collections of rules (March and Olsen, 1984). However, the analysis above suggests that while the number and complexity of rules in the CCP have certainly increased, their significance paradoxically has decreased. Rather, fluid exemplary norms and ideology emanating from authorities at the Centre become critical in understanding the content and direction of rules. Here, the CCP tries to both retain its mobilisation and revolutionary nature and routinise rules-based governance, an aim highlighted by Xi (Xi, 2022). The CCP therefore is both institutionalising and de-institutionalising.

Lastly, the evolution and growing importance of political–moral standards within the CCP has broader implications for Chinese society, governance, and international relations. As the party emphasises loyalty to Xi Jinping and the guiding position of his thought, a more centralised, top-down policymaking approach is likely, with ramifications extending well beyond the party's bounds. This shift not only underscores the party's efforts to centralise and align its internal ideology, but also highlights the potential for a more assertive and unified stance within and outside of China.

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